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THE GALACTIC RIDDLE: VOLUME 2 (OF 4)
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Marc A. Herren
Hermann Ritter

Perry Rhodan NEO: Volume 10 [Complete]

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Episode 19: Beneath Two Moons

By Marc A. Herren

Prologue

When he closed his eyes, the impression of the glaring white sun clung to his retinas. It danced around like a specter brought to life on an antique photo negative.

Some say God doesn't roll the dice, he thought. *Others insist there is no God. And others still wonder who* is *rolling the dice if not God.*

The images from *back then* had been haunting him for hours, as they sometimes did when the fountain of memories suddenly rose up and gushed forth what should have stayed buried.

He knew that most people drew strength from their personal histories. For many, the experiences formed a reservoir from which they drew the knowledge that their lives thus far hadn't been for nothing. That the goals they had achieved, conquests they had celebrated, had served solely to prove that their existence on Mother Earth *meant* something, and that outgrowing the sweet bosom of youth had signaled a necessary and therefore honorable endeavor.

For him, these memories represented a burden that he kept locked up tight. They were shimmering imprints deep in the fountain of memories—and that was more than enough.

It was said that olfactory memories were the strongest. The smell of the staircase from your childhood. Your first love's perfume. Acrid smoke and tear gas mixed with the dusty desert floor. Memories could be submerged for decades, and a single breath was enough to be overwhelmed with pictures, stories, and feelings. A toy car racing down the stair rail. The first dance with the beauty from the other class in his grade. Lieutenant Thomas C. Hardy, mutilated in a surprise attack from the Taliban after they'd held out for hours, supposedly waiting in ambush.

The sun mercilessly blazing down on him as he carried his superior officer through enemy territory for two hours before setting him down at the agreed meeting point, only then realizing that all life had ebbed out of the man's body. Then came the

unbelievable exhaustion and despondency in the hours following this realization.

Goratschin opened his eyes. The sun over the Gobi, over Terrania, beamed with the same intensity it had back then.

Half a lifetime ago. Thomas C. Hardy, farmer from Ohio, hadn't lived to see his twenty-third birthday. But Goratschin was still here. "Rampage," his comrades had called him. He'd hated the name. During his captivity, he'd discovered that the Taliban fighters had given him a nickname too: "Zanawar."

His brother, who had fought in Iraq during the same period, had similarly received a nickname: "Ivanhoe," the noble knight.

The captivity had only been brief. Nothing could constrain a man like him—not drugs, chains, or walls of steel. The hideout deep in the mountains on the Pakistani border hadn't withstood his powers for long. Calcium atoms could be found everywhere.

He'd fled through plumes of fire, accompanied by the screams of the dying. Impelled by pure survival instinct, he'd banished his fear to the most distant corner of his consciousness, ignored the pain, and escaped from hell.

Many years later, he knew that despite escaping that prison, he'd still be a prisoner his whole life long. The fountain of memories ran far too deep. A jailer lurked inside him that would never let him go. Not as long as he lived.

Goratschin closed his eyes. He felt tired.

1.

Tatiana Michalovna

September 14, 2036

On an Alien World

They stepped out of the blackness of the shimmering field into the twilit jungle. Immediately, Tatiana Michalovna knew that something wasn't right. Without warning, she felt weak, as if a heavy weight around her neck was inexorably dragging her down.

"Gravity compensation complete," reported the voice of her suit's Positronic.

The gravity was reduced in an instant. Relieved, she breathed in. The air smelled fresh and vital. The atmosphere was filled with a many-throated chattering, calling, howling, and crying, the flapping of moths and the babbling of a waterfall not too far away.

Only then came the thought that changed everything: *We've left Earth. This is another planet!*

The shimmering died away, the transmitter no longer active. At once, it grew darker around them. Michalovna squinted. The night wasn't impenetrable. Wherever they were, dawn was clearly about to break at the location they'd emerged. The moon's bright disc poured milky light down on them.

She threw a glance over her shoulder. The transmitter had switched itself off. Did that rule out any return to Earth for them? She thought of the dazzling explosion, the last impression she'd taken with her of the underwater dome by the Azores. If the transmitter there had been destroyed, going back was impossible either way.

"Do you feel it?" Trker-Hon asked. "The gravity has changed. We are no longer on Earth."

“I…” Crest began before a rasping breath escaped his lips and his head sank forward.

Only the battledress’s Positronic kept the Arkonide from collapsing. Taking advantage of the delay, Trker-Hon grabbed him under the arms and carefully laid him down on the floor. Then the Topsidan pulled a bottle out of his pocket, unscrewed the lid, and gave Crest some to drink.

Michalovna knelt down next to the Arkonide. In the pale moonlight, Crest’s face reminded her of a drowned corpse. The old man looked ill and somehow lifeless.

“What… What happened?” Crest asked between gulps. “An error during transport?”

Trker-Hon looked at the Arkonide. “I didn’t notice much before the transition. You made a very courageous, possibly deadly decision, Crest. You left your old behind to seek eternal life. Thora’s sudden appearance and her desperate appeal—it must have shaken you to your core. At least, I assume so, although I don’t have a detailed understanding of Arkonide psychology.”

Crest’s eyes widened. “Thora!” he murmured. “Did you see if something happened to her?”

“No, Crest,” said Trker-Hon. “Thora and Rhodan were wearing battledresses. Their shields guarded them from the transmitter’s explosion.”

Crest’s bloodless lips puckered. “I hope you’re right, Trker-Hon.”

“Me too. Don’t forget, Crest, you’re a sick man. A very sick man. And the increased gravity presents an added strain for you.”

“Unfortunately. What’s your estimate? How much stronger is the gravity here compared to Earth?”

“My suit shows a reading of 1.4 gravos,” said Michalovna.

“Hmm,” the Topsidan replied. He pulled his sleeve up to his elbow, took a handful of soil from the ground, sniffed it, then

rubbed his scaly forearm with it. The lizard man had to make do without a protective battledress; none on Earth had fit the Topsidan.

Michalovna watched the procedure with a frown. Then it hit her that Trker-Hon was carrying out this ritual to give himself time to think and care for his scaly skin in the process. Normally, the Topsidan did this with a handful of sand and hot water, but now he was using what he had on hand.

“Will you have trouble without a gravity neutralizer?” Michalovna asked.

“Based on your reading, the gravity is only a little stronger than on my homeworld,” the lizard said. “I’m not as young as I was, admittedly, but I’ll manage.”

“Well then.” Crest wiped the whitish secretions from the corners of his eyes. Slowly, he stood up. “Let’s turn our attention to this world the transmitter has beamed us to.”

The transmitter!

Michalovna turned around again and looked at the device that had served as the receiving station. She activated the multi-function tool at her left wrist and a beam of light surrounded the device.

In both size and construction, the transmitter here was exactly like the one in the undersea dome. Two columns bordered the surface through which matter was beamed to a device on the other side. The columns narrowed towards the top. During use, gleaming energy fields of an unknown nature extended the columns and united them into an archway. The only difference was that a canopy of wood and leaves had been built above this one. Flowers protruded from long-stemmed vases.

Michalovna walked closer, sniffing cautiously. It smelled sweet but also pungent, almost of... “Decay,” she said.

Trker-Hon pointed at a basket woven from wide blades of grass sitting at the base of the transmitter. Dozens of beetles were

crawling up and down the rim. Something lay in the basket that looked like the remains of a five-fingered hand. Pale bones jutted out, from which the gleaming black beetles were gnawing on the last remains of flesh, tendons, and muscles.

"A ceremonial place," said Crest.

Trker-Hon raised his head and breathed in deeply. Then he took a few steps. "The inability to see in three dimensions has made my mind readjust my other senses to compensate." He kneeled down, picked up a handful of humus, smelled it, and threw it aside. "It's only a gain of a few meaningless percentage points. Far less than I could have achieved with purposeful manipulation of the relevant areas of the brain."

Michalovna exchanged a brief sideways glance with Crest. The Arkonide shrugged in a perfectly human manner.

Trker-Hon pushed a bush aside. "But as they say so beautifully, 'What I take with me out of the egg belongs to me alone.' That may not be *entirely* applicable in my case, because my senses sharpened only later, but my genetics already knew this secret before I knew what awaited me. And that's why..." He bent over, then straightened himself triumphantly. "And there we have it!"

Michalovna and Crest went over to him. "What is it?" she asked.

"See for yourself!"

Crest took the object Trker-Hon held out to him: a stick, not quite the length of an arm, made of wood or a wood-like material, covered in grooves and notch patterns.

Crest cleared his throat. "This, too, looks like a ritual implement to me. Thus, the obvious conclusion that the stick is directly related to the transmitter altar."

"But why was it lying in that bush?" Michalovna asked. "And how did you know it was there?"

Trker-Hon's lizard-like face twisted around the wide mouth and the thin-skinned cheeks. Michalovna wasn't sure, but she assumed

this was the Topsidian equivalent of a human smile.

“I didn’t know that the ceremonial stick was in the bush,” he said. “I only followed the tracks. Direct your light source at the ground!”

Michalovna looked at the path that Trker-Hon had taken. Next to the heavy footsteps the Topsidan had left behind was another trail in the soft ground. Smaller, more oval-shaped impressions than those of the lizard being, but clearly human.

Or human-like, she thought.

“Someone had the duty of guarding the altar,” Trker-Hon concluded. “A dull, monotonous task, more a punishment than a ritual honor. You take the ceremonial stick from your predecessor, already knowing that nothing will happen until daybreak, except maybe an animal unexpectedly appearing and then running off.”

Trker-Hon underscored his explanation by moving the stick.

“How great the shock must be when suddenly the unexpected happens! The altar comes to life, light floods the nocturnal forest, pulling it out of its twilight sleep. Frightened animals cry out. Then out of nowhere, a field appears, a terrifying, unfathomable field. Maybe you can already see the silhouettes of the creatures awakened by the altar. Two of them look similar to the observer. The third, however...looks more like a figure from a phantasmium! As quickly as possible, the altar guard jumps into the nearest bush! He loses the stick, but terror gives him wise counsel and carries him away as fast as he can manage. He has to get to his village, his safety. He has to tell the others about it!”

“You’re assuming the guard is humanoid?” Crest asked.

“Not necessarily. But the footprints strongly point towards it.”

“Any other far-reaching assumptions?”

“An assumption supported by a line of reasoning,” Trker-Hon retorted. He bent over and pulled up a few plants. “Look at these leaves. And here, this vine with the suction cups. Do they look

familiar to you?"

Crest answered in the negative. Michalovna shook her head, then immediately felt her stomach tighten convulsively. Those suction cups... "They look alien. Very alien."

"I've already seen these plants once before. Of course, flora is easier to spread from planet to planet than fauna, but the evidence fits together well."

"You allude to the existence of the transmitter," Crest said. "Do you know where we are?"

"Among other things," Trker-Hon replied. "We've landed on a world that not only exhibits a gravity of 1.4 gravos, but has only one moon and is populated by humanoids. Judging by the footprints, rather squat, strong, and intelligent ones. We've only heard of one world in association with the transmitters, and the plant I hold in my hand exists on it. Ferrol!"

Michalovna nodded. Before the transfer, she'd had thoughts about where they might rematerialize. Even then, she'd already thought about Ferrol in the Vega system among other things. She shook her head in surprise as an idea occurred to her and activated her battledress's com unit, making the Positronic search for signals on all possible frequencies.

Meanwhile, Crest tilted his head back. "A shrewd and an indeed seamless chain of evidence," he said, pondering. "Please don't take it the wrong way if I tell you that it's sadly not correct."

The scaly bulges above Trker-Hon's eyes drew together. "How so?"

"Well," Crest said with a melancholy smile, "even an old man's fainting spell can lead to an important discovery. Come with me!"

Crest directed them to a small clearing. Michalovna felt as though she could reach out and touch the enormous disc directly above them in the dark blue sky.

"What do you want to show us?" Trker-Hon asked. "What clue

doesn't fit?"

"The moon."

The Topsidan spread his arms out, uncomprehending. "It's right there, Crest. All you need to do is look up at it."

"It's not this moon that breaks your train of logic," Crest said, an almost roguish smile dancing on his colorless lips, "but *that* one!" He turned around and pointed with outstretched arm at a mountain range. Between two peaks that tapered to points glowed the thin sickle of a moon. A second moon.

"But..." Trker-Hon began. He shook his head as if trying to shake off a pesky insect. "But I recognize it! Up there is Ferrolia, the first moon. The invasion fleet of my people's despotat destroyed the second moon, Byton, in the course of conquering the Vega system, to push the Ferrons to surrender."

Michalovna gasped. What had looked like a squabble between two evenly matched beings of different origins had suddenly swelled into a mystery that took her breath away. *How can this be?*

At that moment, something crackled next to her ear. "My suit picked up a com signal!" she said, excited.

"Play it!"

Michalovna gave the command. For two breaths, all she heard was the distant shouting of animals in the jungle before it crackled again and suddenly...*music* rang out! Astounded, she listened to the light melody and the sparse lyrics sung by a female and very sad-sounding voice.

"That's Ferron," said Trker-Hon. "It fits, all of it—except for that moon!"

"I propose that we sit down for a moment and recover from the surprise," said Crest. "The sun will rise soon, and then I'm sure we'll learn more."

Trker-Hon agreed, although Michalovna didn't have the

impression that the Topsidan needed a breather. She helped Crest and sat down next to him. Trker-Hon rested on his tail for a little longer before following their lead.

Michalovna cast her eyes around the clearing, the trees, and the mountains, looking again and again at the two moons. She listened to the Ferron song. The translator struggled with a word now and again, but beyond that, she immediately understood what the woman was singing about.

Love.

Scientists insisted that mathematics was the real language of the universe. Michalovna had no doubt, however, that it had to be love that tied the cosmos together. For where there was no love, there was also no one to whom the cosmos could mean anything. She knew that she wouldn't win any scientific debates with this argument. But to hell with science!

She pressed her lips together. She didn't want this incomparable situation to corrupt her emotional world. She had accepted the new world as it presented itself to her. And she wanted to keep it that way. Even upon suddenly finding herself on an alien planet. She, Tatiana Michalovna, along with an alien who looked like a human and another who looked like a lizard. Crest da Zoltral, the elderly Arkonide scientist consumed from the inside by cancer. Trker-Hon, the former Wise One who had turned his back on his own culture. Searching for the Planet of Eternal Life together, on a world under alien moons, one of which shouldn't even exist. And she was listening to a song that brought her straight back home, back to her innermost, most sacred self.

A flock of birds flew up. Then a spear of pale blue light thrust out over a mountain ridge. Holding her breath, Michalovna watched as the alien sun rose, a glowing blue-white ball that made the world blaze and sparkle as if sprinkling it with pixie dust.

She raised her hand and shielded her eyes. This alien sun looked enormous. And it beamed in a pale bluish white.

"There's no doubt anymore," Trker-Hon said.

“Yes,” Crest agreed. “It’s Vega.”

2.

Sid González

September 26, 2036

Lakeside Institute, Terrania

Sid González looked at the strange bundle of fur between the white sheets. A unique scent wafted from it, effortlessly cutting through the clammy smell of sterilizing agents and cleaning solutions in the hospital room.

Gucky was breathing through his half-open mouth. A small, pink tongue twitched against his short lip fur.

“His brain waves are normalizing,” Fulkar said. “He’s waking up.”

“Good,” said John Marshall. “Then we arrived at just the right time.”

Gucky’s eyelids trembled; his tongue drew back. From the movement of the tousled fur at the Mousebeaver’s throat, Sid could see him swallowing several times with some effort. The mouth opened and closed.

The odor intensified. It reminded Sid of the streets where he’d grown up. For a few weeks, he’d been the owner of a Chihuahua until it had gone missing during a rushed escape. A laughably small animal with big googly eyes...

Gucky’s eyes were large too. Intelligence slumbered in them, often accompanied by a good helping of frivolity and playfulness.

The Mousebeaver weakly cleared his throat. “What’s going on? Where... Where am I?”

“Among friends,” John said softly.

“In Terrania’s Lakeside Institute,” Fulkar added. “I’m Fulkar, your attending physician.”

Dr. Eric Manoli didn’t say a word. He only brushed across his lips with the nail of his right thumb.

With his thin fingers, Fulkar tapped at the medopad attached to the top end of the bed. “You were unconscious for three Earth days. I could have woken you up, but it seemed appropriate in this situation to let nature take its course.”

Gucky blinked, confused. His head jerked up, but then quickly sank back into the soft pillow. “I was unconscious? That... That’s never happened to me before. That can’t...” He swallowed again. His forehead muscles tensed. “Betty!” he whispered. “Did she make it? And the others...”

John stepped closer to the bed. “Betty’s doing fine. She’s safe now, along with the other mutants Monk abducted.”

Gucky wiped his eyes with slender fingers, wiping away the remnants of secretions that had built up while he was unconscious. “I remember now. Virginia. The farm. And...Monk.”

“He’s being held securely,” Sid assured him.

Gucky lightly raised his head and looked at the teen. Sid had the impression that the corners of the Mousebeaver’s mouth had turned up into a smile.

“Monk, Monk, Monk,” Fulkar said as he folded the medopad back into its initial position. “A remarkable catch! His anti-para-gift is of the greatest interest for research!”

The doctor paused, then tapped twice on a silver touch panel attached to his left temple. Almost confused, he shook his head before straightening up to his full height. “You spent days struggling against this anti-para-gift. Any doctor, even the backward ones from this planet, would tell you that your strength would run out at some point. As such, blacking out was no more than an inevitable consequence. Action, reaction. Simple as that.”

Eric Manoli ran a hand down his face. For a moment, he looked as though he wanted to say something, but instead he stifled a yawn and remained silent.

Suddenly, Sid had to yawn too. His thoughts were creeping along like lazy wanderers in the midday sun. Something in him was vibrating. Flickering. Sid felt as though every individual cell in his body were exhausted. Like the battery of a pod that had only one line left out of five, blinking red in a feverish haste.

Sid recalled a conversation with John. A few days after they'd landed in Terrania, John had pulled him aside with a worried look. He'd advised Sid to keep his curiosity in check, to take it easier, and even to say no for now if anyone wanted to use him—or rather, his gift—on a mission.

"You have to get used to your new life first, Sid," he'd said. "How many times have you had to adjust to new surroundings over the past few years? Before you could really adapt to the new structures, time was already marching on. You were used. You had to grow up at a very young age. At the same time, you still have the dreaming boy in you, who—"

"I'm sixteen," Sid had protested. "I *am* grown up. I'm not a child anymore!"

John had considered a moment before saying, "Okay, Sid. Then let's say you're a young tree whose roots don't reach as deep into the earth yet as the knotty old ones."

"A tree?"

"A tree. And one that's been pulled up several times and planted somewhere new, and that still has to get used to the new soil and strange climate. Trees need time before they're firmly rooted. People need that too. In that sense, you're no different than any other person."

As Fulkar ran an analytical device with a blue glow over Gucky's body, Sid thought, *This exhaustion. This flickering in my cells. The empty batteries. Are they lacking in energy because they're getting too*

few nutrients from the ground?

He shook his head as if trying to scare off a fly that had settled on his thoughts.

Dammit! I'm not a tree. I'm Sid. One of the Terran Union's most important team members. Depending on the situation, I'm a transport option, an escape route, or a weapon for Perry Rhodan. Whenever he needs me, I'm there for him and for John. And the others.

He considered a moment, then thought, *And I'm a spacefarer. I fly to the stars. I don't need any roots. My yearning for the stars is what nourishes me.*

Sid smiled at this train of thought, which seemed very grown-up to him. Then he paused. Something had changed. His stomach felt strange. It suddenly hung in his abdomen like a solid lump. In slow-motion, Sid turned his head to look at the window. Lush rays of sunlight came in, drawing a path of light from his feet to the window. For several seconds, he felt as though he'd lived through all this once before. The room, the smells, the path of light's unmistakable invitation to walk over.

Déjà vu, Sid thought.

As if sleepwalking, he put one foot in front of the other and moved towards the window. Then he looked down at the Lakeside Institute's provisional forecourt. Freshly planted trees wavered in the weak wind blowing from the Juyan lake. There was a bustle of activity on the connecting street that led along the bank towards Terrania. Humanity's new capital city rose up proudly at the other end of the body of water. The nascent sea of houses was reflected in the lake's slate-gray surface. In the center, the Stardust Tower was growing high up into the sky. Sometimes, it felt to Sid as if the tower would never stop growing.

He loved the view. When he didn't have any duties to attend to, he often sat for hours at one of the tower's high windows, or on a street corner, and watched the city getting bigger. He enjoyed the idea of being there when a legend came into being. Machu Picchu, Palenque, Tikal, and other illustrious cities of South America—how

often he'd wondered what it must have been like when they were being built. Hundreds of years later, the image of it had faded like an old-fashioned analog photograph. Faded from the memory of humanity.

Sid had no doubt that Terrania's star would shine longer and brighter than that of Terra's other cities put together.

He raised his right hand and shaded his eyes. Work at the Lakeside Institute of Mental and Physical Health seemed to be proceeding as usual. People of all persuasions were assembling ready-made pieces into barracks and installing water and power lines. Others were walking along the dusty streets within pedestrian zones marked with spray paint. In between, vehicles and improvised machines jolted along, transporting people and building components.

Sid furrowed his brow, unnerved by the feeling of being caught in a dream that wouldn't end. Why did everything seem so strange and surreal? Why were his eyes burning like fire? Why were tears suddenly running down his cheeks?

Many of the people resembled one another because they were similarly dressed. Bright, airy clothes, and also uniforms from which they had removed the rank, troop category, and country insignia. Many among them were Asian and on the shorter side. Others were European, African, Indian, American. And among them...

For a few seconds, Sid stared at him. He felt like his heart could stop beating. He knew him.

No, not him. *It.* A ghost!

It towered above the humans it walked between by more than a head. It was wearing a light brown garment that reminded Sid of the title image of the worn copy of *The Leatherstocking Tales*. As a child, that book had been his most valuable possession until he had lost it one day.

Suddenly, a cold sensation spread through Sid. He *had* to be

dreaming. This man strolling along the street didn't exist anymore! Evil had caught up with him. The evil he'd harbored inside himself.

Sid had thought a lot about evil. About the methods that evil employed. About the risks people took when they walked that path. How many had died after once exuding a sheen of invincibility because evil had given them power and strength?

Strength and power. Not things you could take with you to the other side. All that ever remained were others' thoughts of you. And why, Sid had asked himself back then, would it be desirable to be remembered as a failed villain?

This train of thought had reassured him at the time. It had given him the confidence to stay on the right path. The good guys weren't always victorious. The good guys weren't always right. But you remembered the good guys. You regretted and mourned their deaths. You were happy and relieved when one less evil person was carrying out his dark machinations. The evildoer's death was necessary because evil couldn't triumph.

And because of that—for that exact reason!—it was an impossibility, a *monstrosity*, that he was seeing there on the street, not merely a man who should have been dead.

Sid's confusion turned to dread. The dread turned to fear. And the fear gave rise to anger.

"Ivanhoe!" he cried at the top of his lungs.

The shout echoed off the window, making his ears ring. His heart beat faster. His cheeks felt hot and wet at the same time.

Sparks flew as he concentrated on the jump. He distantly heard John's voice, but the words didn't reach him.

I'll kill you, Sid thought, and he jumped.

The impact felt as though he'd collided with a wall at full speed. The air left his lungs with a throaty cough accompanied by the metallic taste of blood.

Sid staggered backwards as unbelievable pain emanated from his arms, chest, and chin. Through a watery haze he saw the face of the man who couldn't—*shouldn't*—exist anymore.

He ignored the astonished expression that almost gave the man a semblance of humanity. Sid leaped at Ivanhoe's ghost, pulled his fist back, and punched. As forcefully as he could. New pain flowed from the arms into his body. The abomination's leather clothing hardly cushioned the blows at all. Underneath them had to be strands of muscle harder than stone.

A thought shot through Sid's mind. *Not a ghost. A being that came from the ground.*

For several frenzied heartbeats and just as many fist blows, the being let it happen. Then it took a step back and raised its long arms. A plate-sized hand rested on Sid's chest, effortlessly pushing him backwards.

Sid spun his arms almost like the blades of a windmill, but he couldn't reach the golem anymore.

Teleportation sparks flew. Sid jumped a meter away, turned around lightning-fast, and kicked the giant in the back of the knee with all his might.

Ivanhoe staggered.

Sid shouted in triumph. Kicked again.

The other figure regained his balance. He whirled around with catlike elegance. A fist as large as a small child's head shot at Sid, sweeping through sparks. Sid didn't feel the impact; he was already standing behind Ivanhoe again, spinning around and kicking once more.

From somewhere, shouts penetrated into Sid's subconscious. John? Eric? At the same moment the golem turned to face him, Sid teleported. Kicked. Teleported again. Kicked. Teleported. Kicked.

Sid's strength evaporated so abruptly that he didn't even notice at first. Didn't want to believe it. The world sank in red streaks

interwoven with sparks. Sweat ran streaming down his body, drenching his clothes and making his hair stick to his forehead. He felt the strong sunlight on his skin. Smelled the desert dust, the acrid scent of plasphalt being cut to size with laser cutters. Tasted the taste of blood in his mouth.

The next jump took him too far. Furious, he cried out when he realized he was almost two meters behind the abomination. He ran towards the Ivanhoe golem, stumbled, fell feebly into the man's powerful arms, cried out again, and tried to teleport but didn't succeed.

Sid heard sobbing and was ashamed to recognize it was coming from him. His whole world was filled with Ivanhoe. Ivanhoe, who had imprisoned and tortured him. Who had given him a home and made him what he was today. Ivanhoe, who had murdered his friend Elmer and yet had sworn eternal vengeance on him, Sid.

3.

Crest

On a Wrong World

Crest mused to himself. He felt too old to indulge in silly, pointless thoughts, but the puzzle of this world fascinated him and fed his imagination. Foolishly enough, it was the silliest of thoughts that were often the most readily indulged in.

“What do we know about transmitters?” Trker-Hon asked. “Nothing. At least, not enough to really assess what they’re capable of—and not capable of.”

“We know that they can transport solid matter via a superordinate continuum to a predetermined receiving station,” Crest murmured. “Unfortunately, we then run into insurmountable mental hurdles if we try to determine the nature of this continuum. Is it hyperspace? Going through a wormhole? Some other variety of singularity that can connect two points in the universe...or even outside of this universe?”

Trker-Hon sucked in air. “Are you trying to suggest the transmitters might also be able to connect locations in different universes?”

“We both know it’s theoretically possible to connect universes with each other. And, as I already said, the transmitters transport energy and information. That stream would also flow if you linked two universes together.”

“Theoretically,” the Topsidan corrected him. “If one *theoretically* wished to connect them together.”

The human woman stared at him, her brow furrowed. Since the enormous blue sun had risen, which could only be Vega, she’d fled into confused silence. This astonished Crest.

“Are you trying to say that we might have emerged in a parallel universe?” she asked now.

“That would at least explain the moon that was destroyed not too long ago in our universe.” He paused. “What do you know about parallel universes?”

The woman lowered her gaze. “Nothing,” she quietly confessed. “Only what I’ve seen in movies. Parallel worlds where there are duplicates of us, except they might be different from us because their stories developed differently there.”

Trker-Hon scratched his neck, confused. Crest smiled warily. “I see that such thought exercises have inspired the creative minds of Earth. Interesting to approach scientific thought through art. Inefficient, mind you, but thoroughly fascinating.”

“Don’t you have movies on Arkon?”

“There may have been such things,” Crest replied. “A long time ago. Before the new challenges for our gray cells that have only led to an entire population growing weak. In a time before the fiction games.”

Michalovna nodded. “Then you’re assuming we’ve arrived in a parallel world?”

“Hmm,” Trker-Hon began. “Your theory seems astonishingly solid on the outside. But it sounds too fantastical for me. Additionally, I can’t stop thinking back to that signal we intercepted.”

“The radio program?”

“Yes, the radio program. Shouldn’t we be receiving far more traffic if we really are on Ferrol?”

“If we’re speaking of the Ferrol you know, then yes,” Crest conceded. “But who knows how differently everything might have gone in a parallel universe. So the theory goes, a spacefarer only needs to step on the wrong beetle, and in the distant future, someone else will inherit the universe.”

“Are you suggesting that this Ferrol might have fewer people because something happened at some point?”

Crest raised his hands again. “It’s a possibility. A catastrophe of some description. The inhabitants fled to one of the other planets a long time ago, and the Topsidian invaders then left Ferrol and both its moons in peace.”

The Terran woman rubbed the bridge of her nose with both thumbs. “Let’s say this theory is accurate. What does it actually mean? Why is there a connection between the undersea dome on Earth and an alternate Ferrol? Why are we even here?”

Trker-Hon bent down, lifted a handful of sandy soil, and rubbed it over his wrists and tail. “Three possibilities occur to me off the top of my head.”

“Yes?” she asked.

“It could all be a coincidence,” said the Topsidan. “Bear in mind that we’re not the first to have used the transmitter in the undersea dome. A few weeks ago, the half-Arkonide Quiniu Soptor, who once belonged to the crew of Crest’s ship, went through the transmitter along with the robot, Rico. Directly afterwards, it was destroyed—and then it regenerated itself in one more example of its creators’ highly superior technology. But what if the device didn’t regenerate completely? The coordinates it used to beam us may have been wrong. Or taken randomly from memory. Maybe this ‘wrong’ Ferrol is a kind of practice world that the transmitter engineers used to test out its functions.”

As Trker-Hon reeled off sentence after sentence, a chill ran down Crest’s spine. He’d already formed his own thoughts about their situation. Now the Topsidan was giving voice to his own most unnerving ideas, and that made him uncomfortable.

“Or it’s a security switch,” said Michalovna, picking up the thread. “If unauthorized persons use the transmitter, they’re sent to a world they’re guaranteed not to escape from.”

Trker-Hon rubbed his hands together. The remaining sand and

scraped-off scales trickled to the ground. “That could equally be true. Then it would make no difference whether the world was chosen intentionally or not. We would still be here for no reason with no way to be sure we’d ever get away.”

“What’s your second possibility?” Crest asked, tense.

“We’re here because someone planned it,” the lizard being replied. “We’re puppets on invisible strings controlled by the one responsible for building the transmitters.”

“Why singular?” the woman asked. “It could be an entire people, or representatives of them.”

The Topsidan massaged his neck. “That is very possible indeed. I don’t know what would horrify me more—an entire people, or only their nest guard.”

“What would that mean?”

“No idea,” Trker-Hon replied. “But I’m sure we’ll find that out very quickly if it’s true.”

“And what would be your third theory?”

Supporting himself on Michalovna’s shoulder, Crest lifted himself up. “Will you allow me to give my theory about your third theory?”

Trker-Hon raised both palms in a sign that he had no objections.

“Your third theory is that we’re here because *we* want to be here. Because this is a step on the road to our common goal. That’s why we found the transmitter, and that’s why it sent us to this not-quite-right version of Ferrol.”

The Topsidan lifted his wide chin and presented Crest with the softly scaled skin of his neck. “Most astounding. I’d have chosen my words almost exactly as you did!”

“Two She’huan—one thought!” said Crest with a touch of mockery.

Michalovna looked at Crest with a dubious expression. “Can it really be so simple? We wish to be on the Planet of Eternal Life, and *bam*, here we are?”

“No,” said Crest. “This is most certainly not the planet itself. The knowledge of how to reach it is one of the greatest secrets that exists for Arkonides, Topsdians, or Terrans. If it were so simple, my people would have achieved immortality thousands of years ago.”

The woman pondered a moment. “That reminds me of a question I’ve had for some time, Crest. If your civilization is so much more advanced than ours, why haven’t you long since overcome illnesses and old age?” She’d hardly said it before she blanched. “I’m… I’m sorry, Crest. I didn’t mean it like that. I…”

Crest raised his right hand. “I would never admonish you for such a clear and unfiltered expression of your thoughts. Yes, I am old and terminally ill. Your question is entirely valid.”

“Please forgive me,” she said. “That wasn’t very sensitive of me. I’m just thinking of my own people—humanity. Our medicine has made unbelievable leaps and bounds in the last hundred years. We’ve defeated terrible diseases, and in the last 150 years, the average life expectancy has more than doubled.”

“That’s exactly the crux of the matter,” Trker-Hon said, joining the discussion. “Topsidian health outcomes made similar advancements at first. But eventually, progress stagnated. Increased life expectancy led to complications. In the end, the price we had to pay for longer life was too high. Ailments related to old age made life not worth living anymore.”

“A development I’ve observed in many spacefaring peoples,” Crest said. “We reach an invisible threshold that we can’t cross. And at that point, there are only three options left: you come to terms with life being limited, you escape into religion and thus a belief in life after death…”

“Or you embark on a search for the Planet of Eternal Life,” Michalovna finished.

“You’ve grasped it,” Crest replied. “Even though this legend is shrugged off by many as a mere flight of fancy, as a wild hope of the doomed, I’ve made an astonishing observation.”

“That I too have made, independently of the Arkonide scientist,” Trker-Hon added.

Michalovna drew a deep breath. “Namely?”

Crest smiled. “Every spacefaring people knows this legend. In markedly different forms, but there is an unmistakable unity as far as the central points are concerned.”

The Arkonide could see the young woman forgetting everything around her. “Wh... What central points are you talking about?”

“For example, the description or naming of the planet in question,” the Topsidan answered in Crest’s stead. “Expressions like ‘the world that cannot be’ or ‘the imperfect world’ or the bleeding world’...”

“‘The world of light’...” Crest interjected.

“Or ‘the world that knows no night.’ All these have been found to exist in identical or similar form in the vocabulary of peoples that had never encountered one another before.”

“Beyond that, the legends all agree that the Planet of Eternal Life can’t be reached by conventional means. Whoever wants to reach it must ‘surrender to the unfathomable blackness,’ ‘let go of existence,’ ‘prove themselves worthy,’ and ‘take the leap.’”

The telepath’s eyes widened. “This ‘unfathomable blackness’ you’re talking about... Could it mean the transmitter’s radiation field?”

“That’s what I’m assuming,” Crest said. “That’s how I knew I had to entrust myself to the field—whatever the potential consequences.”

“For the same reason, though, it’s clear that this can’t be the Planet of Eternal Life,” Trker-Hon added. “We had to neither let go

of existence nor take on some meaningful test where we proved ourselves worthy."

"What would this test look like?"

"We don't know," Crest replied. "Reaching the planet would be proof that we've passed the test and are thus worthy of immortality."

She shook her head. "But... But if no one's ever managed to uncover the secret of immortality, then...who could be behind this supposed world?"

Crest smiled. "That's the source of a great deal of speculation. Personally, I believe there is very likely someone or some*thing* who has solved that mystery. Someone above our plane of existence."

"You mean...gods?"

"What are gods except superior beings?" the Topsidan asked.

Michalovna breathed out with a snort. "I need to digest this first. Wait a sec! Why... If you're saying this legend is known to all spacefaring peoples, why doesn't humanity know it?"

"Oh," said Crest, "I'm sure the bud of this knowledge is indeed known by humanity...but so far you haven't come far enough to see this bud open. You've come far in a few centuries, but you can still only reach the closest planets in your own system. Only setting out into the depths of space brings the deepest knowledge."

"But we've reached Vega," the Terran countered.

"With the aid of our technology. And you're learning the basics of the legend from us. It's exceptionally fascinating for me, seeing how blithely you humans have simply skipped over millennia of development in the space of a few months."

"You mean we shouldn't be far enough along to worry about this legend yet?"

"Far be it from us to deny any people the necessary maturity for

this legend," Trker-Hon said. "But knowing of its existence is only the start of the real puzzle."

Crest cast a surprised glance at the lizard being. The Arkonide and the Wise One were speaking with one voice, despite the fact that they belonged to fundamentally different species and hardly even knew each other. "Additionally, there are still key questions that must be cleared up first. For example, the question of *why*. Why should these unknown ones want to grant immortality to individuals? Or is it meant as a gift to an entire people?"

"And for me," the Topsidan added, "the most important question is the *price* for eternal life. What are these unknown figures expecting in return for immortality?"

The Terran ran a hand over her face. "You mean you're not sure if you'd actually accept the gift of eternal life?"

With his healthy eye, Trker-Hon looked up at the bluish white sun. "Everything comes at a price. A wise man knows his limits."

Michalovna scratched her head. "But you both agree that by going through the transmitter, we've taken the first step in solving the mystery of immortality?"

Crest exchanged a glance with Trker-Hon. "Yes, we do."

The Terran got up. "Then why are we still sitting around complaining? If this puzzle is so hard to solve, shouldn't we make a start on looking for more clues?"

Trker-Hon lifted himself off the ground in a single, powerful motion. When Crest didn't react straight away, he held out his scaly hand to him. "You heard the woman, old man," he said with an ironic undertone.

4.

Paco

Somewhere in the Andes, South America

He called himself Scaramanca. Beyond that, they didn't know much about the man they were working for. He gave them money, good money, that they could use to feed their children and keep their wives happy.

That's not entirely true, Paco thought. *We know at least three other things about him. For example, that he's a white guy—a gringo. We know that he's some kind of technical whiz. And we know one more thing. He's not all there.*

With a shudder, he recalled his last visit to Scaramanca's refuge. Paco had tried to bring him food, but the jefe had chased him away, saying he wasn't in the habit of eating on a Wednesday and instead demanding a jug of goat's milk with two glasses. This despite everyone knowing Scaramanca wasn't expecting any visitors and could bear a maximum of half a minute in the company of others.

In the company of humans, Paco corrected them mentally. He thought goat's milk was one of the greatest achievements of an agriculturally oriented life. He could also understand why someone would want to avoid solid foods for one calendar day and prefer to use a new glass if sticky remnants of the milk made the first glass look unappetizing.

But not in this man's case. Not in Scaramanca's case. With him, it looked totally different—because he had plenty of company, their jefe, only it wasn't human.

Paco rested his rifle against the weathered wood of the hut, pulled his case out of his back pocket, and rolled a cigarette.

Out here, he could smoke. The likelihood of Scaramanca suddenly deciding to do an inspection round outside the mine was

so low that he took the risk without hesitation.

A month earlier, he had chased a man away who'd dared go about his work in the control room with a little glowing stick in the corner of his mouth. The man, an old, unshaven guy called Gerardo, had disappeared remarkably quickly after that. Shortly afterwards, a rumor went around that the jefe had freed Gerardo from his nicotine addiction *for good*.

Paco brought the rolled cigarette to his lips and licked the adhesive on the cigarette paper in a motion he'd practiced a thousand times. Then he set a match alight and lit the cigarette. He flicked the match away, but almost immediately reconsidered, picking it up again and putting it back in his case. You never did know.

With relish, he took a drag, leaned back, and enjoyed the warming light of the sun in his face.

Paco preferred the lonely hours on the guard post, even though it was still uncomfortably cool in the mornings shortly after the start of spring. Especially up here, at a height of almost 2,700 meters above sea level. Terra Fria, this area was called. Where their refuge was located. Terra Fria—cold land. His home.

With his wife, Juanita, he lived on the edge of an expansive village. They planted potatoes and barley, and kept a few chickens for the eggs. Three times a week, Juanita worked for a gringo who had erected a garish marble villa at what had previously been the village's most beloved vantage point. She took care of the grocery shopping, cleaned, prepared the food, and let the señor grope her behind for a few extra pesos.

Since Paco had started working for Scaramanca, Juanita had had to handle everything alone on the little farm. She did it without complaining, but knew that he couldn't risk losing his well-paid job. Even if he wasn't entirely comfortable with it.

The atmosphere in the widely branching cavern system weighed down on him more than he wanted to admit. You never knew if Scaramanca had installed a few extra security cameras. Most of

them were hardly bigger than a pinhead and horribly difficult to find. Whenever Paco was starting a new guard shift, he allowed himself enough time to search the environment for tiny black points.

You never did know.

5.

Crest

Far, Far Away

"Where do we start with the search?" the telepath asked. "Or, to put it another way, where might we find clues other than the transmitter?"

Trker-Hon grimaced. "I propose the following: we start at the transmitter and then work our way out in a spiral pattern."

"Do you intend to search a whole planet that way?" Crest asked. "Is that the famous Topsidian exploration and conquest reflex?"

The Topsidan tilted his head back and made a hoarse noise. He was laughing. "Forgive me, Crest, if I cut too close to the bone earlier with my remark about Arkonide females. I may be called a Wise One, but it seems my thinking has remained stuck in the rigid and sadly very patriarchal structures of the Topsidian worldview."

Crest smirked. "And I, being the old man that I am, am sorry to have acknowledged such a harmless jibe at all and reacted to it."

"I'm probably too wet behind the ears and not enough of a man to understand what you're talking about," Michalovna interjected, "but I think it'd be better to turn our attention to the search now."

"You're right," said the lizard. "We should approach the matter with appropriate respect."

"No problem," she replied, before stopping short.

"What's wrong?" Crest asked. "Do you have something?"

"For a moment, I thought I could perceive fragments of thoughts."

"Fragments of thoughts?" Trker-Hon asked. "You mean there's

someone nearby?"

The telepath frowned. "I... I'm not sure. It was a kind of shadow..."

"But it's gone again now?" Crest asked.

The Topsidan turned around once on the spot. "Well, there's at least someone who knows we're here. Namely the person who dropped the stick. We shouldn't feel too safe just because there are no signs of civilization beyond one paltry radio program."

"Tatiana," said Crest. "How sure are you that there are no enemies in our immediate vicinity?"

"Very sure," she replied. "However, don't forget that I can only detect thoughts from intelligent beings. Robots, trained animals, and remote control weapons fall outside my area of expertise."

"From now on, we need to be more alert," Trker-Hon asserted. "Come on! Let's start our investigation."

"Please go on ahead," said Crest. "I'll catch up shortly."

Trker-Hon gave Crest a brief look, taking his measure. "We talk about having to be more cautious and you immediately want to be left alone in this clearing? I'm a little confused, Crest."

"I have to be on my own for a short while," he replied. "I'll be with you again soon."

The Topsidan looked at Crest's battledress. "Come straight to us if the situation changes. I mean that not as an order, but as a request."

"I understand your concern, but it's unnecessary. Only for a short while! If something happens in this short period of time, I'll of course activate my suit's flight module and go right to you."

"Thank you!" said Trker-Hon before turning around. He followed the Terran woman, who was walking through the knee-high grass towards the trees behind which lay the altar with the transmitter.

Crest sat down again. For a moment or two, he simply sat there and let the world move around him. After many years of searching, and analyzing thousands of records, he had finally managed to put the hunt for immortality in concrete terms and even take the first step.

The elderly Arkonide looked at the sky, where a school of large pink birds were flying above the clearing, almost a little ungainly. The beating of their mighty wings sounded like the rolling of distant thunder.

The glowing ball that was Vega had already worked its way overhead a little, drenching the world in cool colors. That was in stark contrast to the warmth it exuded.

Crest breathed in deeply. The air smelled fresh and somehow *alive*. Too alive. The Arkonide suppressed the thought of his mortality and cast a scrutinizing glance at the forest's edge. The other two had disappeared among the trees.

He opened a magnetic clasp on his battledress and pulled out the scroll he'd brought with him from Earth. He had made this great find under the seabed of the Atlantic with the help of the mutants Wuriu Sengu and Ariane Colas. There was, in fact, a second station that connected to the underwater dome erected by his forebears. This station had been well hidden—and it had looked as though its inhabitants had only just left. In storage, Crest had discovered hundreds of artifacts from every era of human history. Pottery, works of art, weapons, everyday items, and this scroll. Following his intuition, he'd pocketed it without the historian Cyr Aescunnar noticing.

After that, events had rushed them. Crest had only had the chance to read the scroll's first few sentences. That handful of words had been enough to convince him that Earth was the right place to begin his search for the Planet of Eternal Life.

He unrolled the rough, paper-like material. *"I had to bury Cunor today,"* he read—the text was in Arkonide and could be made out without issue even though the ink was smeared in places—*"my last comrade from the old days. He had become an old man."*

Word by word, Crest absorbed the story told by this fellow, whose hand must have trembled strongly while writing.

"A primitive human has slain Cunor, the Arkonide read. *Out of fear, I presume. The humans aren't gruesome by nature, but they tend towards violence when threatened. And the unknown seems to be a threat for most of them. They still have a lot to learn. Cunor's death hits me hard. All the more so because it was unnecessary. It shouldn't have happened. His suit's energy shield should have protected him. And if not the shield, then the suit itself. It did not. Why not? I've examined the suit and it was in perfect working order. Cunor must have parted from life of his own free will. For what reason, I can only guess. He had grown silent. Aging by my side must have become unbearable for him..."*

"Aging by my side," Crest repeated in a whisper. "Aging."

On Earth, he'd only made it as far as this point. Now, he read on.

"My own existence seems unbearable to me too. I am immortal. At least, that's what I was promised. And since the day I was granted immortality, I haven't aged a single day. Quite the contrary. As it's though I've gained energy and stamina, even mental acuity. But to what end? Rico is not prepared to give me answers. Or does he not know himself? It's all too easy to forget that Rico is neither an Arkonide nor a human. But in these moments, it's especially obvious. Rico doesn't understand what the loss of a friend means. And Cunor grew close to my heart over the years. He felt almost like a brother to me."

Crest lowered the scroll. His eyes were tearing up so strongly that the letters were more like a sea of blurry ink. After wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, he read the key sentence aloud. "And since the day I was granted immortality, I haven't aged a single day."

Immortality. It existed. He was holding the proof in his hands.

Crest's whole body was shaking. Suddenly, he felt like he was freezing despite the suit and the strong rays of the enormous sun. "Who are you?" he asked. "An Arkonide? An *immortal* Arkonide? Rico's master? Commander of the *Tosoma*? Builder of the dome at the bottom of the Atlantic?"

Crest considered this a while, then lifted the scroll and read the rest of the text. *"But now Cunor is dead. I'm alone on this primitive world. Among people who have a greatness inherent in them that they don't even suspect. The resourceful humans, who will exterminate their own species if left to their own devices."*

"I don't know if I have the energy to keep going," Crest murmured aloud. With these simple words, the stranger's writings ended.

In his mind's eye, ever more individual scenes were connecting themselves together into a great whole. He didn't know much about this man—it could only be a man—but what he knew fascinated and frightened him to his core.

Only a few minutes could have passed since he, the Terran, and the Topsidan had spoken of the price one would pay for immortality. Eternal life also meant eternal loneliness. After all, what were friendships, what were relationships, when the ravages of time only scraped at one half of the pair?

How long can a mind remain healthy when it sees its love, its friends, its children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren die? Crest thought.

Soft rolling thunder startled him out of his thoughts. The Arkonide squinted up at the morning sky. He put the scroll away in an inner pocket of his suit and got up.

He decided to keep the tale of the lonely man to himself for now. And he didn't want to concern himself with the dark side of immortality again until—unless—he actually stood before the final step.

The Arkonide considered whether to activate the suit's flight unit, but decided to walk. The gravity neutralizer already needed constant power. Until they knew how long their journey would be, they had to be sparing with their resources.

He met the Terran and Topsidan in front of the transmitter.

"Nothing!" Michalovna said before he had the chance to ask a

question. “The thing’s dead.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We couldn’t detect any energy emissions,” Trker-Hon clarified. “The transmitter has completely shut down. However the process is triggered, the control panel no longer appears.”

Crest furrowed his brow. “Why do you want to start up the transmitter again?”

“Because I think we need to know what our options are,” Michalovna replied. “And one of those should be getting away from this world, preferably back to Earth or to another place of our choosing that we’re sure will bring us closer to the Planet of Eternal Life.”

“You don’t seriously want to go back already when we only just got here?” Crest pursed his lips.

“This world gives me a bad feeling. Something’s not quite right here. I just can’t put my finger on what.”

“If Crest’s theory about a parallel universe is accurate, that could be responsible for your feeling.” The tip of Trker-Hon’s tail rose to waist height, then smacked against the soft ground. Twigs cracked and a finger-length blue worm sought to escape. “You see, until now, no scientist has ever managed to produce evidence for the existence of parallel universes. A conventional theory states that the universes aren’t formed into an enormous mountain of foam in which each bubble represents a separate universe, but that the universes essentially permeate one another. Meanwhile, each universe vibrates on its own level. And the more similar the vibrations are, the closer the universes relative to one other. It would therefore interest me to know how the transmitter—” He stopped short and raised his angular skull into the air. “Do you hear that? It sounds like an…”

Crest gave his attention to the ambient noise. After two or three moments, a dull rumbling stood out from the jungle’s acoustic pattern.

He smiled. “I know what that is. A bird migration. Strange pink birds that look almost as though they’re about to fall out of the sky, the way they overexert themselves.”

Michalovna looked up as well. Her mouth open, she walked between him and the Topsidan. “Those aren’t birds,” she said.

Confused, Crest stood next to her. He looked through the trunks and treetops and up into the sky. A huge brass-colored gondola was drifting past above them. It hung from a much larger object, baggy and roughly oval shaped.

“An airship,” Crest breathed.

“A zeppelin,” the Terran murmured. Involuntarily, she took two steps back. Her face was suddenly as pale as chalk. “We have to get away from here right now! They mean to destroy us. And they won’t hold back!”

6.

Sid González

Lakeside Institute, Terrania

Sid was standing in front of the door. He stared at the hand that wavered just centimeters away from the touch panel. Strangely, the little finger had begun to tremble. Not the whole hand.

“Be brave!” John had said to him.

Sid stared at the little finger. A few little black hairs were growing on the first phalange. Had he ever noticed them consciously before?

Puberty had set in relatively late for him. Amid the confusing developments of the last few years, he’d developed a rather ambivalent relationship with his own body. He, the fat boy, whom many still saw as only a child. He, the dreamer, who had yearned for the stars and a better future, and thus hadn’t even wanted to completely give up the childhood he’d never been fully granted. He, the teleporter, whose gift cost him an unbelievable amount of energy and had, in a quarter of a year, transformed him into a slim, almost gaunt young man whose muscles now stood out softly under his dark skin.

Before, they’d never really taken him seriously. All except John, of course, who had always been a little more friend to him than guardian. And now? When would they *all* see him as a man? When would he sleep with a woman for the first time? And, far more importantly, who would it be? Sue? No, he couldn’t really picture that. She was like a sister to him.

Again, Sid heard John’s voice in his mind. “Be brave!” The words that had encouraged him to have this meeting.

Sid closed his eyes and repressed the cloud of thoughts he’d escaped into to evade reality and his purpose. He breathed in

deeply—and immediately held his breath, alarmed by the overly loud noise of his inhalation. In his mind's eye, he saw the door open, and *him* towering there. Laughing at Sid for standing alone and afraid in the hallway.

"Be brave!" Sid whispered. He watched as the trembling of his little finger took over the whole hand, and goosebumps formed as though a cool breeze had brushed against it. Sid pressed his lips together and pressed the touch panel.

With a purring sound, the door opened.

Ivan Goratschin looked up. "Sid González," he said. "I'm glad you came."

Sid lowered his arm, nodded in a curt, military fashion that he'd learned from watching Mercant, and entered. *Keep your cool,* he thought. *Don't let him think he's stronger than you are. Be brave.*

With stiff steps, he walked over to the seating area where Goratschin was sitting. On a round plastic table in front of him was a wooden bowl shaped like a leaf. In it lay red and green fruits. Cactus fruits and mangos. Next to that stood a jug filled with a clear liquid, probably water, and two clean glasses.

Sid was conscious of Goratschin not getting up. Was he trying to deceive him by not putting his full height on display? Indecisive, he stayed standing in front of the man, who looked just as he remembered. Or rather, as he remembered Goratschin's brother. Tall and powerful and dangerous.

However, numerous differences stood out about him when compared to Dr. Ivanovich Goratschin—to Ivanhoe, who had looked more energetic and resolute than his twin brother, now sitting before Sid in a beige pleather armchair made of artificial leather with one leg crossed over the other.

This Goratschin's skin looked pale, almost sallow, which could be down to the room's subdued lighting. Unmistakable were the already graying temples and the deep lines that ran up from the corner of his mouth to his nose. And the eyes.

Sid blinked in confusion, resisting the pressure for two heartbeats, but then looked down at the fruit bowl. Ivan Goratschin's eyes were strange and uncomfortable to him. For a moment, he fought against the almost overpowering urge to turn around and get out of this room as fast as his legs would carry him. Or to just teleport away.

Goratschin lifted a hand and gestured towards the empty seat. "Please, sit down, Sid. I think we have some catching up to do."

His voice sounded similar to his late twin's, But Sid felt the warmth that this Goratschin made it resonate with. *You're not fooling me, devil,* he thought.

Then he raised his head and looked Goratschin directly in the eye. "Maybe," he said, and sat.

"How are you doing?" Goratschin asked.

"Fine."

"Have you lived in Terrania long?"

"Terrania hasn't existed for long. A few weeks. Months."

"You're right. Please excuse the stupid question."

Sid remained silent.

Goratschin smiled. "You have an incredible gift. I've faced a few enemies in my life, but never one so quick."

"Your brother also thought I had an incredible gift!" Sid blurted out. The rage—it was just *there*, as if out of nowhere. He lifted both arms and presented his palms towards Goratschin. They looked a shade lighter than the skin on the rest of his body—remnants of the burns the oh-so-noble Ivanhoe had given him with such lofty intentions. "In fact, he thought it was so great, he did whatever he could to make me show it to him!"

For a few moments, he kept that pose, then he lowered his arms and crossed them in front of his chest. Goratschin sat up straight.

Suddenly, he looked taken aback, even a little sad.

The devil has many faces, Sid thought.

"I lost many years of my life." Goratschin's eyes were shimmering. "When I came back, I had to learn that nothing was the way I knew anymore. I don't know you, Sid González, but I don't want you to ever experience a situation where you come back from a journey and your family, friends, and comrades are either dead or have become total strangers. For you to come home and discover that you don't have a home anymore. I'll tell you something, Sid: I won't apologize for my brother's actions."

"You're a twin," Sid said, annoyed that his voice sounded far too high-pitched and childish. "Twins have the same genes. Same thoughts."

"And yet they are granted different paths," Goratschin countered. "Did you know that Ivanovich and I were originally conjoined? Our family risked everything to flee to America with us. Doctors cut my brother and me apart. They separated us so we could go our own ways. And we did that."

Sid could hardly keep himself in his chair. He could hear his own heart beating. So loud and disconcerting. Revealing. "Your brother was a murderer. He killed my friend, Elmer Bradley. He killed others. He wanted to kill me too. Tell me you're not a murderer!"

Goratchin's face darkened as if he'd fallen under the shadow of a thundercloud. His facial features hardened, the lines between his mouth growing deeper and sharper, as if scored by a knife.

"I was in a war. Thirty years ago, it was. Afghanistan. I fought. I *had* to kill to survive. For my buddies to survive. I..."

Goratschin faltered, Sid noticed with satisfaction. The man had spoken quickly, almost hastily. Within fractions of a second, he'd lost a great deal of the calm he'd exuded before.

"I'm not a murderer. I'm a..."

"A monster," Sid said with relish. Now his voice didn't sound

high-pitched and childish anymore. He'd found his groove. The authority Goratchin had lost had transferred over to him.

Goratschin closed his eyes and let himself slowly sink into the armchair's cushions.

"I know exactly what you are and what you can do," Sid said, delivering another blow. "Maybe you didn't burn kids' hands like your brother did. But when you got out of your coma, you also didn't stop doing evil things. You knocked the *Good Hope* out of the sky. And you almost burned the Fantan ship. That might have started a war that could have destroyed the whole Earth!"

"That wasn't me," Goratschin uttered. He looked at Sid. Tears shimmered in his eyes. "Another will was being imposed on me. I was used!"

Sid breathed in deeply. Smelled the fresh sweetness of the mangos. Felt the power he had over the giant in this moment. "Someone who gets used once can get used again," he said, not holding back. "Terrania is the city of the future. The people living here have a vision. A vision that also has powerful enemies. How long until these enemies notice that there's a weapon here, an *instrument of murder* lying in wait, and all they have to do is *use* it to burn the city and its vision to the ground?"

Goratschin wiped his face. He looked old and tired. "John told me that you wanted to apologize to me," he said. "I wasn't prepared to defend myself in front of a moral tribunal."

Sid couldn't fully suppress the smile that automatically crept onto his face. "You're like your brother. He was also a monstrosity."

Goratschin looked at him. Instantly, the emotions disappeared from his face. The man's gaze felt cold and merciless. A chill ran down Sid's spine as fear rose in him.

"Yes," Ivan Goratschin said clearly. "I'm like my brother. I always have been. But I won't be soon. That's why I came here. To the Lakeside Institute." He leaned over to Sid. "Look, Sid. It's all true, what you said about my actions. But what you don't know is

that I'm tired of being a weapon. I'm tired of this gift getting in the way of everything that's important to me. Not too long ago, I almost managed to be happy. I met someone who became very important to me. But it's no use as long as this…this *thing* is inside me. My gift is there for the singular purpose of destruction. How I wish I knew the secret of teleportation instead, like you do. Only after… After I fortunately didn't manage to destroy the Fantan ship, I…thought it was over, let's say. I just recently separated from Ishy Matsu, from the only love I've ever found. To find myself. To find out who I really am."

Sid found it a struggle to keep his emotions under control. He felt like a Vulcan right before an emotional outburst. "And," he managed, "did you find out?"

"Only partly. I at least know what I don't want to be anymore. A weapon that can be used."

Sid couldn't take it anymore. He leaped out of his seat and aimed his pointer finger at Goratschin. "That is total bullshit you're talking! I don't buy a word of it! Terrania and Lakeside are my home! You have no right to be here! I want you to get the hell out!"

Sparks flew, and Sid jumped.

7.

Crest

Under the Wrong Vega

"They won't hold back!" the Terran repeated, agitated. "They're about to point a weapon right at our location!"

"In all the putrid nests, what is *that?*" Trker-Hon asked. "Just look: it's powered by a combustion engine!"

"You're right," Crest replied, his voice strained.

The airship was maybe two hundred meters long and of a shape halfway between a cigar and an oval. Propellor blocks, four by four, were flange-mounted on the sides of the balloon body, where the air resistance was greatest. Rattling, they emitted gray fumes that the powerful propellers chopped up and dispersed.

The bronze-colored passenger capsule glistened on the airship's underbelly.

Fascinated, Crest shook his head. "I was ready for anything, but not a sight like this." He felt an impact against his left arm and looked at Michalovna's face.

"Are you having hearing problems?" she asked. "We're in mortal danger! We have to get out of here!"

"It's just a funny balloon," Trker-Hon said. "A pleasure cruise if you ask me."

"No!" she cried. "You don't understand—I'm picking up quite a few thought fragments. That thing up there is a *guard ship!* The damn Ferrons have mobilized reinforcements. The people up there are convinced that the *gate* has spewed out demons from Ferron mythology! They can only mean the transmitter. To go with all that, I'm receiving several images that have an astounding similarity to Earth's dragons!"

“What are dragons?” the Topsidan asked.

“Mythical creatures akin to lizards or snakes,” Crest murmured, not taking his eyes off the airship. “Or in other words: you, oh wise Trker-Hon!”

“They want to destroy us and the gate before we can bring ruin to Ferrol.”

Crest froze and looked at her in surprise. “They really call this parallel world Ferrol?”

Michalovna opened her mouth, flabbergasted. Irate. “We have to get away from here right now! Is that penetrating your thick skull? They have weapons on board!”

“But they’re just primitive—”

The airship flew above them. Dark black dots emerged from the underside of the bronze gondola.

“Dammit,” said Trker-Hon.

The Terran hissed something in an unknown dialect, wrapped her arms around the Topsidan’s chest, and shot ten meters into the air with the power of her suit’s flight unit.

“Follow me, Crest!” she shouted.

Crest gulped, surprised. His fingers brushed against the command panel on his left armband, but in the commotion, he couldn’t find the input field for flight. His gaze fixed firmly skyward, he saw the dots falling in his direction. He suddenly heard a voice. It sounded strange and familiar all at once. *A voice command, you fool!*

Only then did he regain his senses. “Battledress, emergency launch! Follow them!”

A strong jerk pressed the air out of his lungs. Suddenly, the ground beneath his boots disappeared and the treetops were speeding towards him at an absurd speed. He wanted to throw his

arms up for protection, but they were far too heavy. He wanted to scream but found no air.

Crest tried to think, but his whole world was filled up with these enormous black things. They grew larger at a rapid pace and split into two, then four, then an endless number of pieces. In an instant, the sky darkened as the black wall fell straight towards the jungle giants' canopy.

Crest felt the blood drain from his head as his arms and legs suddenly tingled, then hurt. Tree trunks flew at him. Every time a collision looked unavoidable, the suit performed an evasive maneuver. The Arkonide was thrown this way and that in his armor, even though he knew the battledress was supposed to be flat and straight around his body.

Finally, the pressure on his lungs subsided. He breathed in. Hastily, like a drowning man.

Then the black wall reached the treetops. And exploded.

Somewhere in front of him, he saw the shapeless bundle formed of Michalovna and Trker-Hon gliding just above the ground. They were far too slow to escape the deadly danger.

"Down!" he wheezed. "Support!"

His words were swallowed up by the boom of the explosion and the whistling of the remaining bomb pieces. The suit's Positronic seemed to have understood him, however. It adjusted his flight path and darted straight towards his two companions.

As if in slow motion, Crest watched the rest of the black wall descend upon them. Far above them were the tongues of light from the explosions.

Crest wrenched his arms forward, managed to take hold of Trker-Hon's backpack, and held on tightly. Briefly, his own weight weighed on him as the impact more than halved his speed. The Positronics reacted quick as a flash and coupled the defensive shields together.

The three of them flew over the ground. Crest didn't look up anymore. He ignored the booming and whistling above him. A last great shadow appeared just beyond his field of vision, but it didn't reach them. It crashed into the ground behind them.

The detonation that followed caught their group and threw them with full force into one of the huge tree trunks. Crest felt nothing anymore. He surrendered to the sudden darkness.

"Dammit, Crest!"

He didn't know how long the voice had been there for.

"Extra sense?" he murmured. "Is that you?"

The voice sounded again, overlaid with a hideous cracking and bursting. "Get a hold of yourself, Crest! You've landed! Can you hear me? We're being attacked!"

"Is that you, extra sense?" he asked.

Someone drummed against his chest with their fists. "Your flight unit isn't working anymore. We have to work as a team!"

Crest threw his eyes open. Not a handspan above him, he saw Tatiana Michalovna's sweat-drenched face behind her helmet visor.

"The Ferrons are here!" she cried. "They want to wipe us out!"

Crest flinched, sat up with a jerk...and looked into an inferno.

The jungle was ablaze. Where trees had stood before, now only enormous burning torches towered into the air. Between them, a handful of figures were hastening towards them wearing dark-green body armor. Behind their visors, he could see bluish faces.

"Help me up!"

Michalovna grabbed him under the arms and pulled. Something was pinning him down. Crest looked and saw a splintered tree trunk lying diagonally over his legs.

The figures were carrying weapons. Crossbows with loaded bolts. Their tips glowed dark blue.

Then a shadow shot past above them. It flew towards the frontmost of the attackers, crashed into him, and tumbled to the ground with him.

Michalovna cried out. It sounded more born of anger than fear for the Topsidan's life.

The woman grabbed the tree trunk and made her suit lift her and it into the air. Crest managed to pull his legs out. He rolled sideways and somehow managed to get onto his knees.

Trker-Hon emitted a wild scream that drowned out the roar of the unleashed forces of nature. He leaped into the air, the nearest Ferron's weapon in his hands. When the next assailant reached him, he swung the crossbow like a club into the enemy's helmeted head, then his stomach.

The remaining two opponents looked thrown for a loop by this unexpected twist. One of them tripped over a burning branch; the other managed to raise his crossbow, but the glowing blue bolt sailed past the Topsidan, missing him by mere centimeters. As he realized his error, the shaft of Trker-Hon's weapon was already hitting him in the face. He slumped to the ground like a stone.

"Over here!" bellowed Michalovna.

Trker-Hon looked up and then ran towards them. His clothes were hanging from his body in burning shreds.

"You hold on to my left side, and Crest, you hold on to my right!" she ordered.

"It won't be enough to—" Crest stammered.

"It will!" she interrupted. "Hold on tight!"

He did as she demanded. Trker-Hon followed him without hesitation.

The three of them lifted off and glided just above the jungle floor. At first they moved barely at walking speed, then they steadily accelerated.

When Crest looked back, he saw nothing but blazing flames and an enormous cloud of smoke and ash. He had no doubt that the transmitter, the link to their own dimension, was lost forever.

Crest accepted the thought without the slightest hint of grief. No one was chasing them. That was all that mattered right now.

8.

Anne Sloane

Lakeside Institute, Terrania

Anne Sloane watched as the gaunt doctor rushed back and forth, his white coat wafting up as he dished out orders. Every so often, he came to a stop, out of breath, and briefly tapped at the silvery module he wore attached to his temples as if he needed to think. Then he spent a few minutes observing the activities of the workforce and issued stern orders.

Most of the workers came from villages at the edge of the Gobi or from the Chinese army. They didn't understand any English, though by now Fulkar had mastered it down to the most obscure medical terminology.

Sloane looked up into the cloudless sky. Dull construction sounds reached them from outside the provisional walls. It smelled of tar and burned plastic.

The Lakeside Institute of Mental and Physical Health—or just "Lakeside," as it was commonly called—was one big construction site on the bank of the Juyan lake. The first finished building, a three-storey structure in a Neo Art Deco style, served as a new home for the mutants of the Terran Union. Here they could live apart from the hustle and bustle of Terrania and had a chance to learn more about their gifts under medical supervision. Per their individual wishes, they could do it alone or together with other mutants.

John Marshall, the Institute's leader, gave them a lot of free rein. It was important to him that Lakeside became a place of trust for the specially gifted people. Sloane knew that someone like Sid González—despite his friendship with Marshall—wouldn't stay at the Institute if there was any hint of it becoming a second Camp Specter.

The area where Fulkar was having the experiment set up would be contained in an enormous hall later. For now, it was a dusty square distinguished from the rest of the compound by its lack of tents and living containers.

"No, no, no!" Fulkar snapped at a woman at least two heads shorter than he was. "You have to angle the protective equipment for the cameras towards the center of the experiment area, like I showed you!"

The woman bowed. "Yes sir!" she said in a friendly tone and busied herself with the construction work.

"By all the quacks and alchemists!" Fulkar exclaimed. "The other way around, woman! No, not like that! Honestly, listen..." He threw his arms into the air. "A translator! I need a translator! She doesn't understand me."

A young Chinese man bounded over.

"What do you want? I told you to familiarize yourself with the podium's remote controls. Why aren't you at your post?"

"I'm Hue Tan-Ju," said the young man. "The translator. Your translator!"

The doctor looked at him for two seconds. "A human translator!" he then cried. "That's far too imprecise for me. I'll take care of it myself."

He rushed over to the makeshift construction of highly compressed plexiglass with a high-performance camera built into it. He rotated it, activated the small screen, and directed it at the podium on which the Arkonide battledress lay.

"Like this!" he said. "Now repeat this with the other five cameras."

Hue Tan-Ju bowed before burying the woman in a torrent of words. The old woman looked back and forth between the object, Fulkar, and their translator. After Tan-Ju was finished with his explanation, she bowed and replied verbosely.

“She says she thanks you for repeating this and that she’ll dutifully carry out the instructions.”

Fulkar sighed loudly and reached for his temple. On the module there, a diode blinked. A tap of his spidery finger made the light go out.

One of the doctors at the Lakeside Institute had jokingly termed this module the “migraine measuring device” because there appeared to be a strong correlation between the blinking and (what Fulkar saw as) incompetent behavior around him.

Sloane couldn’t help smirking. To her, Fulkar gave the impression of a confused professor overwhelmed by simple worldly things.

The comparison wasn’t entirely unfitting. Sloane knew that Fulkar was from neither Earth nor Arkon. The doctor made a great secret of his origins, but it was clear at a glance that there were many straightforward things he wasn’t familiar with. Sometimes he seemed to be on the verge of despair, especially when Manoli or another doctor confronted him with the current state of Terran medicine. Mostly, however, he restrained himself and patiently gave his opinion on the direction in which medical research should proceed. Sloane had noticed that he held fundamentally different views than those currently prevalent on Earth, particularly when it came to applied ethics.

Fulkar bustled over to her. “I’m going to request better staff from Mr. Adams,” he said. “I have to be able to work in peace. How can the simplest things be misunderstood?”

“If you hadn’t tied me down, I’d gladly have rushed to your aid, Doc.”

“You have your own task to ready yourself for,” he spoke back in a sharp tone. “Besides, I haven’t ‘tied you down.’ In the absence of modern sensors, I’m forced to measure your brainways with adhesive contacts and wires. One more unsatisfactory limitation, but unavoidable at present. Are you ready?”

Sloane nodded. “Ready and waiting, Doc. What do I have to do?”

“It’s quite simple. I will activate this battledress’s defensive shield from here. For the first ten seconds, it will run at full capacity. Then I will reduce its energy by ten percent every thirty seconds. Your task is to use your telekinetic ability to move the red ball sitting on the podium. The experiment is being observed by cameras, air pressure sensors, temperature sensors, and more. If you grow tired, you’re entitled to insert a break. Aside from that, I’ve allowed for a break every ninety seconds for you to recover your strength. Any questions?”

“No. That’s all clear, Doc.”

Fulkar busied himself with the pad that Sloane was wired up to. She felt a light tingling sensation emanating from the contacts.

The doctor pulled a microphone in front of his mouth. “Fulkar to all staff! Experiment para-dash-two-dash-one is starting. I ask for complete silence! Mr. Marshall has promised me all building work will cease within a hundred-meter radius during the experiment.”

Suddenly, the contacts on Sloane’s temples and neck felt ice cold. The tingling intensified.

“I’m activating the suit’s defensive shield!” said Fulkar.

She knew that the mutants’ gifts fascinated the doctor. Although he’d never expressed it in words, everyone involved with Lakeside knew that researching these special abilities was the true driving force behind Fulkar’s participation at the Institute. He’d shown himself to be deeply impressed by the “significantly high occurrence” of special gifts among humans. From that, Anne had concluded that para-gifts were seen much more rarely among Arkonides and other aliens, or perhaps not at all.

One more reason to feel special, even *chosen* to some extent. And one more reason to take part in experiments like this.

The universe was immeasurably large. How many peoples were out there who had mastered the secret of faster-than-light space

travel? If what Crest had said was true, their main motivations could be divided into the two urges of “curiosity” and “greed.” And when making contact with the latter group, it was of prime importance for humanity to have a few cards up its sleeve. Cards in the form of para-gifted folk who could come close to matching the staggering technology of these spacefarers.

“No, no, no!” came Fulkar’s force. “I see in your cortex that you’re thinking of everything *but* the task at hand! You have to focus on the red ball!”

“Sorry,” Sloane replied. “It would help me if I could see the ball a little better.”

A little white lie. Sloane was annoyed at her own lack of concentration.

“Hue Tan-Ju!” Fulkar said in a commanding tone. “Raise the podium thirty centimeters higher!”

Sloane breathed in deeply. The cube-shaped podium gently moved upwards. On the folded-up battledress rested the base, and on that lay the ball. It gleamed slightly in the sunlight. A barely visible spherical flickering surrounded the entire podium—the activated shield.

“Very good,” she heard the doctor say. “Concentrate!”

The universe shrank to a tunnel, the gleaming ball sitting enthroned at the end of it.

“Don’t hold your breath! Continue breathing normally!”

Sloane felt herself becoming one with her task. There was the ball. All she had to do was give it a slight push, something she’d done thousands of times.

The ball weighed only a few grams. A slight nudge would be more than enough.

She channeled her para-mental power, felt for the object with her invisible feelers...

...and hit against an electrically charged wall. *The shield.*

"I... I can't reach it."

"Don't talk. Focus on the task! On the red ball!"

Sloane gritted her teeth. She could *see* the ball, sure, but she couldn't *feel* it. As if it were a weightless projection, not a solid object.

She increased her efforts. The wall set off an uncomfortable tingling in her head. The more vehemently she tried to push through the wall, the more it intensified. Her head began to feel hot all over. Suddenly, an association with fire ants overcame her. They were swarming along the neural network in her brain, spreading caustic acid.

She groaned, forcing the image out of her thoughts. Then she gathered her strength, bundled it up into a single, sharply pointed lance—and pushed with all her might.

The lance bored into the electrical wall. And shattered into ten thousand pieces.

White-hot pain exploded in her head. She screamed. A tremendous paintbrush was covering the world in thick black stripes, making it all disappear.

At some point she felt a pricking at her throat and heard a light hissing sound.

"Fine," said Fulkar. "We'll bring the break forward."

Slowly, light, bright tones broke through the tar-like blackness. The world was putting itself back together, illuminating once more.

Sloane blinked. Gratefully, she felt the fire ants in her head growing fewer, then finally disappearing altogether.

"Did... Did I get it?" she asked, tired.

"I'm afraid not," Fulkar replied, leaning over the pad. "Outside of

the shield, the sensors measured wave-shaped activity. But inside it, you didn't move even a single speck of dust."

Sloane sighed. "I need to rest for a bit."

"Ten minutes," Fulkar said. "Then we'll try it again."

She wiped the tears from her eyes. "Maybe you should start on the lowest intensity, Doctor. The defensive shield felt like an impenetrable wall to me."

Fulkar peered at her with his inscrutable eyes before replying, "I can't reduce the shield's intensity any further. It was already on the lowest setting."

"But you said—"

"A little psychological trick. I beg your forgiveness."

She sighed again. "If that's true, I don't believe it's—"

"What does belief have to do with it?" Fulkar shot back. He leaned over her. "You just have to concentrate harder! From your brainwave data, it's abundantly clear that you were producing useless images."

"Don't think about pink elephants," said Sloane.

"Excuse me?"

"If I tell you not to think about pink elephants, what do you think of?"

Fulkar's eyes narrowed. "I think you're trying to distract me!"

Sloane smirked. "Come on, Doc. I bet you have a picture of a pink elephant in your head right now."

The red diode on Fulkar's temple blinked. Fulkar tapped it. The blinking stopped.

Oops, she thought. *Did I just trigger a migraine in the white-clad*

demigod?

"I absolutely did not, Miss Sloane!" Fulkar hissed. "When I'm working, I'm always one hundred percent focused. And it would behoove you to act in the same way!" He turned back to his pad.

Sloane stretched in her seat and reached for a glass of fruit juice waiting for her on a small table. At that moment, a shadow fell over her. She looked up.

A giant, just as tall as Fulkar but almost twice as wide with a muscular physique, dark hair, and pale skin stood before them.

"Ivan," she said. "What are you doing here?"

Fulkar whirled around. "The igniter!" he uttered.

"Anne, Mr. Fulkar," Goratschin said. "How's it going?"

"Ivan Goratschin," Fulkar replied stiffly. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. When I heard about your capabilities, I immediately thought of various experiment and training setups with which we could analyze and intensify your gift!"

Goratschin didn't respond to this statement. Instead he asked, "Are you conducting research into weapons technology?"

"No," Fulkar responded. "Just working with what we have: battledresses from the *Tosoma*'s inventory. Energy shields have so far proven impenetrable for the para-gifted. The interactions are therefore useful in experiments that bring us closer to an explanation. I'm a doctor, not a military man."

"And yet you offer to *intensify* my gift of igniting calcium atoms?" Goratchin asked casually.

"Naturally, in the name of science—"

Goratchin turned around. "In the name of science, I have another request for you, Doc."

Fulkar straightened up to his full height. "Namely?"

“I want to be rid of my gift. Free me from this curse, Doctor! I want to be a normal person. Not a weapon.”

The diode on Fulkar’s temple began to blink. The doctor refrained from tapping on it.

“That’s not as easy as you imagine. And why have you come to *me* about this?”

“Because you deal with para-gifts—and because you’re a doctor, but not a human...”

An astonishing change took place in the gaunt man. For a moment, he lost his composure. “That... That would be an outrage! Humans may be technologically backward, but equally, the appearance of para-gifts is astounding! Don’t you understand that you’re the proof that humanity might be on the verge of an evolutionary leap that—”

“I don’t want to be proof of anything, Doc,” Goratchin interrupted. “I want to be a normal person. Maybe I overestimated you too. With your superior knowledge, I assumed you’d be capable of helping me.”

The diode blinked more frantically. *Migraine alarm!* Sloane thought.

Fulkar straightened his white coat. “Of course I’m capable of helping you. Come and find me in my quarters this evening!”

9.

Tatiana Michalovna

Ferrol, Vega System

They landed on a hilltop. For a while, they used their optical systems to monitor the landscape that lay behind them.

Apart from a huge cloud of smoke slowly rising into the sky and dispersing, they didn't see any remnant attack. The imposing airship had to be circling somewhere behind the smoke.

On the other side of the hill was a village. The houses looked simple and functional. Just beyond that was an expansive field of black and gray. Glass-like forms towered into the sky like decayed teeth with only rocky terrain in between.

Michalovna stared at the spectral scenery that didn't quite fit with the lush flora they'd seen so far. "Eerie," she murmured. "Almost like a lunar landscape."

Crest stepped up beside her. He'd taken off his battledress to take a better look at the damaged flight module.

"The work of senseless destruction," he said. "There was a town there once. Now all that still exists is a small area at the outer edge."

Trker-Hon made a strained wheezing sound. She turned around and looked at the Topsidan, who had tied the remains of his burned and charred clothes around his waist. His upper body, hands, and legs were strewn with burns. He acted as though none of this concerned him, but Michalovna didn't have to read his thoughts to know the lizard being was beset by terrible pain.

Crest went over to him and applied a gel-like liquid to the wounds, retrieved from a cartridge in his suit's internal med kit.

"Why did you bring that crossbow with you?" Michalovna asked.

“I only saw you use it as a blunt instrument, not as a projectile weapon.”

Trker-Hon looked at her without a word for a moment. Then he said, “As soon as I saw the airship, a thought came to me. One too fantastical for me to take seriously. But I had to take the crossbow with me so I could get a calmer look at it. Now I’m sure. It’s what they call the Glowing Death.”

He nodded at Crest, bent down, and picked up the crossbow. In a few moves, he folded in the two sides of the bow, turned them once around the axis, then pulled them apart in a way that made the weapon about a third longer. Suddenly, the shape in his hands no longer resembled a crossbow, but a weapon with a dish-shaped blast muzzle.

“In short-range mode, the weapon fires energy bolts that boast not only high penetrative strength, but almost one hundred percent lethality. With organic targets, the bolts’ energy cells unleash a ‘bloodburn’ that vaporizes all liquid in seconds. Blood plasma reacts particularly quickly; hence, the name.”

He raised the weapon.

“For longer distances, the crossbow can be converted into a rifle. The bolts still serve as ammunition, but the firing mechanism splits them into hundreds of microscopically thin needles. The gunman determines how wide to make the funnel that generates the effect. The needles are then accelerated by a super-magnet. Observers can see the funnel glow for that moment. In this mode too, the lethality approaches one hundred percent. A single needle can cut through heavy walls and kill every living thing it touches.

Trker-Hon fell silent and looked at the weapon in his hands. Michalovna was about to ask what point he was getting at with all this when Crest made a sound of surprise.

“I’ve heard of this weapon,” he said. “It was outlawed by the Thort, who found it ‘barbaric’ and ‘un-Ferron.’ It hasn’t been used for millennia.”

“You have an excellent memory, Crest,” the Topsidan replied. “I saw an example of this weapon myself not too long ago, when I gained access to their history museum during the invasion of Ferrol. I wanted to better understand the beings we were waging war against.”

He turned the weapon around and handed it to Michalovna, who took it.

“The Glowing Death!” said Trker-Hon. “You’re holding a weapon in your hands that hasn’t existed since the end of the Ferron Dark Age!”

“But how can…” Then Michalovna turned pale. “We’re not on a parallel world.”

“No,” Crest confirmed. “We’re on the real Ferrol—but thousands of years in the past.”

10.

Sid González

Lakeside Institute, Terrania

Sid ran through the darkness. His naked feet hardly touched the ground. His heart was hammering wildly. *I can't let him catch me!* he thought.

Panicked, he glanced over his shoulder. He saw the flames engulfing Lakeside Institute like a giant torch.

Where was Gucky? The Mousebeaver had woken him from his nightmares. Gucky's large gleaming eyes had filled his field of vision.

"Quickly, Sid!" the alien had squeaked. "You have to help me! Goratschin sparked a fire while he was sleeping. Everything's ablaze. You have to get the others to safety!"

When he hadn't reacted, the Mousebeaver had struck him in the face with a furry hand. Repeatedly. One of his sharp nails had slit open the skin below Sid's left eye.

Sid had disappeared in a ring of sparks and landed in the black desert. Since then, he'd been running away, away from the screams of the dying, away from Gucky, Goratschin, and responsibility. Just away.

"Sid!" came the Mousebeaver's voice. "What's wrong?"

"Leave me alone!" Sid shouted. "I can't! Don't you get it? He'll burn us all to death! I can't go back!"

Sid couldn't make out the Mousebeaver in the darkness. How was the small creature managing to keep pace with him with those little legs? He'd never go back to Terrania. John, Perry Rhodan, and the others were all in the past now. He was gone!

He felt Gucky's furry hand against his cheek. The touch felt soft and reassuring.

"Stay away!" Sid sobbed. "Please, let me go."

"I won't do that," Gucky said. "It's all fine. Open your eyes."

Confused, he stopped. Only then did he realize he wasn't running at all. He was lying down.

Sid opened his eyes. The light in his room was burning. Gucky was sitting cross-legged beside him on the red duvet.

"I... I dreamed all that?" he asked.

"Again," the Mousebeaver confirmed. "And very badly. You even managed to wake me up. That doesn't happen often."

Trembling, Sid sat up. His hair clung to his head, as soaked as if he'd just gotten out of the shower.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Sid pressed his hands over his eyes. Water was pouring out of them. Furious, he pressed his lips together. He hated crying in front of other people. But every sob that escaped from him wore down his composure until he finally cried without reservation.

He felt the Mousebeaver's arms touching him, felt the warm fur and the soft pressure of the arms around him.

Sid took his hands off his eyes and hugged the alien, sensing the comfort emanating from the warmth of his body.

"The subconscious can be really brutal sometimes," he heard Gucky say.

Sid held on to him like a lifeline. He'd often imagined what it would be like to own a dog again. A big dog that kept him company, that he could talk to about anything and everything. Soft fur that warmed not only the body, but the soul too.

“Hey, hey, hey!” said Gucky with a touch of mockery in his voice, pulling himself out of Sid’s embrace. “I’ll magnanimously ignore that you’re comparing me to a dog. But when it comes to keeping company and listening, I’m a renowned expert. I once got a diploma in the sadly far-too-undervalued discipline of social interaction.”

Sid sniffled. “No you didn’t. And I don’t like it when you read my thoughts.”

Gucky made his incisor flash. “I didn’t. It was written all over your face. I don’t only have an honorary doctorate in para-gifts, you know—I’ve also achieved a certificate of achievement in face-reading.”

Sid looked at the Mousebeaver’s innocent face and couldn’t help laughing. Then the memory of the nightmare came back, and laughter was suddenly far from his mind.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” the Mousebeaver asked.

“It’s about Ivan...about Goratschin,” Sid replied. “Since he came to the Institute, I can’t sleep anymore. Nightmares torment me almost every night. And when they don’t, it’s only because I hardly sleep, afraid that he’ll suddenly be standing in my room and everything could go up in flames. And...” He stopped short.

“Would you allow me to read your mind?” Gucky asked. “Then I can form a picture myself.”

Sid nodded reluctantly. Then he thought of Camp Specter, of Clifford Monterny and Elmer Bradley. Of Dr. Ivanovich Goratschin, who had locked him in his office, and of the flames that had burned the palms of his hands. Of the fire. And the escape.

Gucky heaved a deep sigh. “I’d have nightmares about that too,” he said. “But do you really think Goratschin poses a danger? I’ve read his thoughts too. And I found nothing in there we’d need to be afraid of.”

Sid didn’t take in the Mousebeaver’s words. Instead, he looked at

his pale palms and saw the subtle scarring that hadn't completely disappeared after being healed.

"Look at me," Gucky asked.

Sid looked up. Gucky wrapped his warm, dainty fingers around Sid's. "Ivan is filled with great sorrow. He and his brother voluntarily signed up for the armed forces because they didn't want to be outsiders anymore. They hadn't been prepared for the killing. They wanted to prove themselves and didn't notice that with every mission successfully accomplished, with each destruction caused by the power of their minds, with every human life they ended, they grew more distant from themselves. They only wanted to belong."

Gucky let him go, folded his arms, and floated cross-legged in the air, supported by his telekinetic powers. "I'll leave you alone now. But think it over."

Sid nodded reluctantly again. "I will."

"Glad to hear it. I wish you pleasant dreams."

The light in Sid's room went out, and right after that he heard a sound as Gucky dematerialized and the air rushed into the ensuing vacuum.

For a while, Sid remained lost in thought. Then his sweat-soaked pajamas got too uncomfortable. He switched the light back on, got out of bed, and went over to the closet where his clothes and other possessions were stowed. His eyes fell on the leather jacket John had given him a few days ago. It was dark red, smelled thrillingly of leather, and hung on a hanger on the inside of the closet door.

Sid slipped out of his wet pajamas and put on underwear, a black shirt, socks, and jeans. Then he took the leather jacket off the hanger and closed the closet. For a while, he looked at himself in the tall mirror on the front of the door.

He put on the leather jacket. At first, it felt a little stiff. After moving his arms and upper body a few times, this feeling went away. This jacket became a second skin, a cocoon that enveloped

him, strengthened him. John couldn’t have given him a better present.

Then he teleported.

11.

Tatiana Michalovna

In the Past

Ferrol

It all fit together. The moon that shouldn't be there. The sparse com transmissions. The antiquated-looking airship. The weapon outlawed thousands of years ago.

"It should have occurred to us from the start that a transmitter could also send its information traveling along the timeline," Crest said.

"Oh, come now," Trker-Hon replied. "It's much easier to be convinced that you can bore a hole in the walls of the multiverse than travel back in time. We both appear to have the same blind spot in our scientific approach. We ruled out time travel because it's more dangerous than anything else in the universe. Think of the paradoxes! It's not long ago that I was analyzing the Ferrons' art of war in Thorta. I was some distance from the action, not expecting a stray beam shot that could have burned me to a pile of ashes. Then an insect flew into my eyes—one so persistent that it landed under the nictitating membrane and ultimately at the side of the eyeball itself. For an uncomfortable moment, I thought I'd lose my remaining eye."

Still shaken by Crest's revelation, Tatiana Michalovna was only half listening.

"The healer had the beastie out before I could even tell him where to find it. When I returned to my previous location, the wall had a hole in it the size of my head. Who knows? Maybe that insect saved my life. And maybe in a few minutes I'll step on one of that insect's forebears and thus destroy the chain of events that will save my life thousands of years from now. A classic paradox."

Michalova knew what a paradox was. What mattered to her right now was that the Arkonide and Topsidan did what *she* wanted as soon as things got ugly. Like before, when she'd taken command.

"So we're in the past and have to be careful not to step on any insects," she summarized.

"To be clear," Crest hurried to mention, "the insect story was just an illustrative example. We don't have to be scared of changing the course of history."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because I'm assuming we really are on the trail of the Planet of Eternal Life. What we're experiencing now is the start of the great test of our worth! Specifically, our task is to find another transmitter and use it."

"And why does that mean we can step on insects without worrying about changing the timeline?"

"Because the beings who sent us on this journey have a greater understanding of the temporal structure than we do. Regardless of our actions, we can't change history."

"Why not?"

"I see two possibilities," Crest replied. "One, they could have sent us into a *potential* past and will bring us back to our original timeline in the end. Or..." A smile crept across his face. "Or we can't change anything because it already changed when we embarked on this journey. Time corrects itself *before* the paradox can occur. A crazy thought—and yet a plausible one, no?"

"I have nothing to add to your observations," Trker-Hon said. "Apart from a question, perhaps: where should we look for the second transmitter? Ferrol is rather large."

"Hmm!" Michalovna replied. "There's actually only one place we know of with another transmitter: the Red Palace of Thorta!"

"Only, where is Thorta relative to our current location?" the

Topsidan pointed out. “And how do we get there? Your flight units are either too weak or too damaged to transport the three of us. And I’m assuming we don’t intend to give ourselves up to the soldiers just to get inside their vehicle.”

Crest lifted up his battledress. The unleashed energy had overloaded his defensive shield generator. The subsequent collision had damaged the flight unit.

“Tatiana and I are dependent on the gravity neutralizers,” Crest said. “Me far more than her. But neither of us can be expected to take on a burden of an additional forty percent. For that reason, we shouldn’t use the flight units at all anymore. They and the shield generators consume too much energy. If we want to extend our time on this past world, we have to concentrate on the true necessity: counteracting the increased gravity!”

“I agree with you there,” said the Topsidan.

“Our real problem, though, is that we know far too little about this world,” Michalovna said. “How are we supposed to make plans if we don’t even know where we are and how far away Thorta is with its Red Palace?” She wiped the sweat from her brow. Pondering, she turned around and looked at the small village at the edge of the ruined terrain. “Give me a little time,” she murmured. “I’ll find a solution.”

12.

Paco

Somewhere in the Andes, South America

"No! I said a jug of goat's milk!"

"But we rustled up Kobe beef for the jefe. He specifically wanted a steak!"

Paco ran a nervous hand down his face. How had the thankless task of bringing food to Scaramanca fallen on his shoulders again? It was Wednesday, and he still hadn't gotten over his meeting with the boss a week earlier. Now the problems were starting before he'd even entered the inner sanctum.

"Do what you want with the meat. I won't bring it to him anyway. A jug of goat's milk and two glasses. That's all I'll take!"

The cook, an overweight guy with bushy eyebrows who was missing his incisors, shrugged his shoulders. "Excellent. Then I'll eat it myself."

Paco took a tray and waited patiently until the cook brought him what he'd demanded. Then he neatly arranged the jug and glasses and lifted the tray with them on it. The milk sloshed perilously back and forth in the jug.

He immediately felt sweat forming on his brow. He didn't even want to think about what might happen if he spilled the milk along the way. He was behind schedule already. If anything happened, he wouldn't have time to get new milk and clean vessels.

"Good luck," the fat cook said, pointedly pulling off his apron and tossing it into the corner.

Paco knew that he was on his own. Carefully keeping the tray level, he slowly walked down the staircase cut into the rock wall. *At least this balancing act has one advantage,* he thought. *As long as I'm*

concentrating this hard on the milk, I don't have to think about what's awaiting me.

As he thought this, he moved one foot a little too far forward and missed a step. He tumbled down, the tray lurching forward.

His heart skipped a beat. In his mind's eye, he already saw the jug, glass, and milk sailing through the air in a high arc and crashing to the floor with a loud clatter in front of the door to the refuge.

In a desperate motion, Paco got to his knees lightning-fast and stretched out as far as he could without falling down the stairs himself. He kept his eyes fixed firmly on the milk as it shot up over the edge of the jug...

...and then fell back into the vessel again without a single drop being spilled.

Quaking, he stopped and let out the breath he was holding in, thanking the Mother of God for holding her protective hand over him.

Cautiously, he started moving again, testing every single stair with the tip of his toes before stepping on it. Progress was slow now, but better to arrive a few seconds too late than make a mess.

When he finally reached the end of the staircase and with it the wooden door to the refuge, he sent a second thank-you heavenwards.

Paco slid his left hand under the tray and knocked twice on the door with his right. His heart pounding audibly, he stood and waited, trembling inside and out as he waited for Scaramanca's response. When nothing answered him but silence, he counted to twenty and knocked again.

"Who's there?" came a muffled voice.

"Jefe, it's Paco. I bring your foo—uh, your nourishment!"

"Enter!"

Carefully, he opened the door. It creaked as always. Paco stepped inside.

Inside the refuge, dull monotony was the order of the day. Paco heard the humming of electronic devices and was sure he could feel erratic vibrations beneath the soles of his boots.

He walked a little farther. The room immediately gave him an overwhelming feeling of trepidation. His eyes adjusted to the light conditions far too slowly. Setting one foot in front of the other, he had to rely entirely on his memory to find a way through the labyrinth where Scaramanca waited at the end.

He heard the murmuring of artificial voices. *Their* voices. *"A visitor. Do you sense him too?"* Paco heard the agreement, felt *their* presence.

"Jefe?" he asked into the darkness. "Where are you?"

"He's filled with fear."

"The darkness bothers him."

"Do we wish to illuminate his path?"

"Jefe?" he repeated. His voice sounded far too high, revealing far too much.

Suddenly, a ray of light appeared in the nothingness. Paco jerked back. In the middle of the cone stood one of the dolls. Its arms were missing, ending in stumps at the shoulders. Its face was completely indifferent and lifeless. Its eyes painted open, its lips closed.

Paco knew that the mannequin could see him and was speaking to him. Or rather, that it was speaking with the others.

Within a few fractions of seconds, more spotlights lit up, exposing the dolls that were previously in darkness. The company Scaramanca kept. His personal host.

Paco stood among them, paralyzed, his left arm trembling violently as it held the tray. The glasses clinked softly.

“Look at him,” he heard one of the whispering voices say. *“A body of flesh and blood and so little self-control.”*

He looked at the tray and thought his heart was about to give out. Like a pair of lighthouses, the glasses towered from amid a sea of goat milk.

“Where’s the steak I ordered?” asked a dark voice from behind him.

Reflexively, Paco whirled around.

The jug tipped over. The rest of the goat’s milk spilled across the tray and onto his pants.

“Jefe!” he managed. “It... It...”

Scaramanca stood before him. Clad entirely entirely in black, his night-vision goggles slid up onto his forehead. He raised a hand and one meticulously manicured finger pointed at the tray in Paco’s hands. “Why haven’t you brought me a steak? I can’t even look at goat’s milk anymore without getting stomach cramps.” Scaramanca’s inscrutable eyes were looking at him. Between the raven-black eyebrows, a deep crease stood out on the otherwise flawless forehead. “Do you have nothing to say to me?”

Paco’s lips were trembling. He had no idea what to say. Would it be wise to remind Scaramanca that exactly one week ago, he’d insisted to Paco that he never ate any solid food on a Wednesday, and that this was why Paco had stuck to the milk instead of bringing him the already-cooked steak?

No. Scaramanca was *always* right. If the rules had changed, they’d changed, and that was that.

“I’m...” he choked. “I’m sorry.”

“Did you hear that?” whispered one of the voices. *“He’s sorry he made a mistake. Such self-disclosure.”*

Scaramanca looked around. “Shh!” he ordered. “If I want your opinion, I’ll ask for it!”

The jefe took a single deep breath, then shook his head. “What a mess,” he said.

Scaramanca turned around. He went over to one of the dolls and tore a cape-like piece of fabric from its body. Then he came back and held it out to Paco. “Put the tray on the floor, clean yourself up, and come with me!”

For a moment, Paco stared at the boss. Then he briefly looked at the naked mannequin, which seemed to be giving an accusatory stare from its painted eyes, before putting the tray down in a mechanical motion and taking the piece of fabric.

As Scaramanca turned away and walked to the exit, Paco wiped his belly, legs, boots, and hands in a feverish haste, then dropped the cloth and hurried after him.

Noble, Paco thought. Everything about Scaramanca seemed noble and lofty to him. His face, body, bearing, manner of speaking, and gait. Paco was deeply afraid because he knew Scaramanca never did anything for no reason. Everything he did had a connection to his goals. Although none of the men knew what these goals were, they all agreed that they could be nothing honorable.

Scaramanca went up the staircase, taking the steps two at a time. He wore black canvas shoes with soft soles that didn’t make a sound. Once at the top, he went in the direction of the camp.

What now? Paco wondered. *Is he going to shoot me? Or lock me up?*

Scaramanca reached the door to the security wing, placed his right hand on the scanner, and turned to Paco as the door lumberingly opened. “I have a job for you. When you’ve done it, you’ll make sure I get my steak and the refuge is cleaned.”

Paco nodded hastily. “¡Sí, señor!”

Scaramanca stepped all the way along the aluminum-clad hallway. There he identified himself again, and the door to the tech dungeon opened. They went inside.

The being was standing—sitting, rather—in a cuboid of thickened plexiglass, on the upper face of which was mounted a collection of technical apparatuses. The cube was resting on a metal disc that was around fifteen meters across and halfway embedded in the ground.

Paco's stomach twisted. He'd seen these beings in the news. Cylinder-shaped, not quite as tall as a human, with fine scales like a lizard's. Dark openings yawned on the upper half of its body. Thin extremities protruded from its body in seemingly random places. They were hanging limp.

"A Fantan," said Scaramanca. "I call him Bob. The problem is, he refuses to eat. We've given him water, bread, meat, various fruits and vegetables, but he ignores it all. Find out what he wants!"

"But, señor..." Paco said, horrified. "How..."

"Think of something!" Scaramanca turned around and left Paco to his fate.

In disbelief, Paco looked at the being. "Hello," he said after a while. "You're not really called Bob, right?"

13.

Tatiana Michalovna

The Past

Ferrol, Vega System

It cost Michalovna a great deal of energy to grasp the inhabitants of the simple houses with her telepathic senses. She clambered from brain pattern to brain pattern. Over time, one seemed just like any other to her. Fragments of thoughts, memorial flowers, heavy thoughts. Sadness, anger, happiness, excitement—all expressed through inner dialogues.

They were like little windows into the soul that Michalovna could open just a crack and briefly peer inside. As quickly as possible, as simply and effortlessly as she could manage, keeping an eye out for familiar patterns.

What were these non-humans thinking about? What images, what words? What language? Was the person immersed in a conversation in which case their thoughtscape automatically structured itself to make speech easier? Or was the person lying on a filthy pallet somewhere, lost in agony over the daily suffering they were subjected to?

Michalovna didn't feel the short grass against her back, nor the green worm that had managed to climb up from her sole to her foot and was now making its way towards her knee via her boot fasteners and her shin.

What she *did* feel was her energy running dry. How many heads had she scanned in the space of a few minutes?

She forcibly pulled herself together. Focused. Her thought-finger brushed over four people who were sitting close to one another while talking. *And eating.*

This was what she'd been looking for! When four people were conversing, their thought patterns always overlapped. Such images were more valuable to Michalovna, as they ruled out the *perceptual errors* that inevitably came about when two unsynchronized minds, or their thought receptors, clashed.

Within a few seconds, she grasped the story of this family that was sitting around the dining table in sweet harmony. One of the children, called Freya, would be celebrating her birthday the next day. She'd wanted to see "the funny people." Alongside this, she had images in her head of Ferrons who chased one another and fell over again and again.

The two older Ferrons discussed the circus visit with sober images in their heads. They were speaking about the money, which they didn't really have, that an evening for the family would cost. They also spoke about safety. You could never be sure when the streets and other areas would turn dangerous again.

The motherly conversation partner argued that the circus was traveling with its own team that would assure the safety of the visitors and circus workers.

It's perfect, Michalonva heard echoed in the mother's thoughts. *What a coincidence for the circus to be visiting exactly when it's our Freya's birthday.*

The thought about the war. About the war in their heads. It would be nice to be able to escape it for a few hours.

Michalovna threw her eyes open. She knew what she had to do now.

"You're joking," Trker-Hon said. "You want us to join them? As camouflage?"

Crest didn't say a word. He was lying beside the telepath and looking over the cliff edge down onto the worming procession of vehicles of all imaginable shapes and sizes.

“It’s just an idea,” Michalovna defended. “But their travels will lead them through various towns straight to Thorta!”

She’d brought both men to the outcrop with her flight unit so they could get a good view of the kilometer-long caravan and explain her plan.

“It would be completely inappropriate!” Trker-Hon said.

Crest looked up. “I can understand your reservations, but I disagree. I ask you, which are the best years of a Topsidan’s life?”

Trker-Hon drew back from the cliff. “Where are you going with this, Crest?”

“For us Arkonides, it’s childhood.”

Michalovna crawled back too and sat with her legs crossed. She didn’t know what Crest was getting at. “Maybe on your planets, where there’s no war and no more misunderstandings. Many children on Earth don’t grow up in such favorable conditions.”

Crest raised his hands. “You’re right there, of course. Partly, at least. Many children on Earth are forced to grow up far too quickly. After all, what is growing up if not losing the mystique of childhood? The endless trust in one’s parents? For a child, parents are the She’huan—or God, or Allah—with which they share a personal union. With every dark thought, every glimpse of reality, the child loses its childhood. And, in our weightiest hours, how often have we wished ourselves back there? Back in the lightness of childhood? But the cogs of life keep turning. A boy becomes a man. Sometimes a truly great man for whom it’s horribly embarrassing to have once been a helpless child.”

He lifted his hands and pointed at his wrinkled skin. “Then come the autumn and finally the winter of life. We cling to our youth as long as we can. Many question themselves, unable to accept that their capabilities and their world are getting smaller, step by step. Others, meanwhile, embrace age as if it were a long-lost friend from whom they’ve been awaiting a visit. For age can also relieve the burden. As the days grow fewer, the worries trickle away too.”

He smiled before continuing. “Is there anything more beautiful at the end of life than being able to enjoy it again? To ignore those who point their fingers at you and commiserate that the powerful man of yore has become a drooling, doddering old man. And this old man soils his pants with pleasure while he watches the sunset that could be his last, embracing life with a free heart.”

“You’ve clearly thought a lot about aging,” Michalovna said. “But it doesn’t entirely add up. If you welcome the last phase of life because it resembles childhood, why do you want to become immortal? Wouldn’t that mean you’d be trapped forever in your middle years, between child and old man?”

Crest’s smile widened. “You’ve grasped it. And that’s exactly why the gift of immortality might in fact be no gift at all, but rather its dark sibling: a curse.”

“And despite that, you want to solve the puzzle of the Planet of Eternal Life and become immortal?”

“It appears so, yes.”

Trker-Hon picked up a handful of sand and groomed his scales again, careful not to touch any of the areas damaged by the flames. “On a fundamental level, I agree with what you say about the three big phases of life. It’s not so different for us Topsidans. But what does that have to do with Tatiana’s suggestion?”

“Everything,” Crest replied. “You say that it’s not ‘appropriate’ for you to play this role. And I say that we have to do it for exactly that reason. If we want to gain immortality, we won’t only lose the shadow of death by old age, but also the lightness of being old.”

He approached the cliff’s edge again. “Look at this imposing caravan. From a distance, it looks like a tank battalion, and yet it exists for the exhilaration and diversion of the Ferrons, who have little to laugh about during the horrors of this truly dark period. We might not often have the chance again to find the child in the old man.”

“I’m afraid we have no other option,” said Michalovna.

Trker-Hon sighed. “You’re right,” he said. “I’ll do it.”

14.

Sid González

The Rocketman, Terrania, Earth

The bar was no more than three sheds arranged into a horseshoe formation with a counter, a shelf with bottles on it, a dozen tables with four dozen chairs, a large wall monitor, and...a jukebox.

Sid looked at his wristwatch. It was two thirty in the morning, but there was an upbeat vibe in the Rocketman despite the early hour. Around twenty people were spread across the room. A man and woman were dancing in front of the jukebox, which was playing an ancient love song from the last century. The others were sitting at the tables.

It smelled of people. Of excitement and adventure. And slightly of loneliness.

Sid gave himself a push, went over to the counter, and sat on one of the empty barstools. A pretty woman with Asian features was standing behind the bar. She was clearing glasses out of the ultrasonic machine, holding them up to the light to check they were clean, and then putting them on the counter in front of her. She threw Sid a disarming smile.

“A beer, please!” said Sid.

“I’ll be right with you,” she said, speaking loudly over the music, and turned back to her glasses.

Dammit! Sid thought. *She didn’t understand me.*

Sid felt stupid. Young and stupid. As cool as the leather jacket was, it clearly didn’t guard against embarrassing situations. *My first beer in a bar, and she didn’t even hear me order it.*

Sid put his right hand in his pocket and reassured himself that he hadn’t lost the bills along the way. Lakeside was about twenty

minutes outside the city proper, and the Rocketman was at the outermost edge. Sid had tried to jump straight here, but the teleportation had hit him harder than expected, so he'd walked the remaining two kilometers on foot.

With an energetic yet elegant motion of her knee, the woman closed the door of the ultrasonic machine and came over to Sid. She was somewhat older than him, maybe twenty-five, and was wearing tight blue jeans, a short blue apron, and a white top that showed more of her figure than it hid. She'd tied her black hair into a ponytail that bounced with every movement. Her face looked like one from the cover of an e-magazine: slim, symmetrical, with large, expressive eyes, a button nose, and full lips.

When she stopped in front of him, her scent enveloped him. The perfume smelled of sandalwood and peaches. She was enchantingly beautiful.

"Hey, sweetie. Do your folks know you're here?"

"I don't have any folks," he replied. He wanted to add something but faltered in his attempt to lighten the mood with a sauve line.

"I'm... I'm sorry," said the woman with a look of concern.

"I'd like a beer."

"Of course," she replied. "But you know we only accept solar here?"

Sid pulled the crumpled bills out of his pocket and smoothed them out on the counter. "I work for John Marshall. I can pay."

The woman tilted her head slightly. Her ponytail danced. "I've only been in Terrania for a few weeks. Should that name mean something to me?"

Sid furrowed his brow. Until now, he'd assumed that John had to be a household name for everyone in Terrania. Clearly, that wasn't the case. "I'm Sid," he said.

She graced him with her smile. "Well then, Sid, what kind of

beer would you like?"

He hadn't reckoned with that question. In movies, the guys seeking solace in alcohol always just ordered "a beer" or, if they wanted something stronger, "a whiskey" or "a double."

He racked his brain, but he couldn't think of any beer brands. He suddenly thought of Paco, the boy he'd looked up to in the Barrio San Sebastian. What had he said back then? Which beers were the best ones?

Sid looked the beautiful woman directly in the eye. "I'd like an American beer."

She couldn't help laughing. "Coming right up, sweetie."

Sid felt heat rising in him as she turned around with ponytail bobbing, bent down, and took a bottle with a red-and-white label out of a refrigerator. She reached into her back pocket and pulled out a bottle opener, which she used on the bottle cap. With a loud *pop*, it flew through the air. Then the bottle was standing in front of him on the counter.

My first beer ordered in a bar, he thought.

"Enjoy, Sid."

She was about to turn away already, but he quickly asked, "What's your name?"

"Cherry," she said.

"Like the fruit?"

Cherry laughed. "Yes, like the fruit. My real name's Rong, but since that sounds like the word 'wrong,' I call myself Cherry among English speakers."

"How old are you?"

She laughed again. She leaned over the counter, filling the air around him with her scent. Sid only saw eyes, and—a little farther

down—her abundant cleavage.

“I’ll give you a little tip, sweetie,” she whispered to him. “If you’re going to keep flirting with women in bars, never ask their age. It doesn’t always go down well at all.”

Sid held on tightly to his bottle. “Th... Thank you!” he stammered. “I’ll take that on board.”

Cherry straightened up. “Good. Then I’ll get back to the other customers. And by the way, I’m twenty-two.”

She swept away, leaving behind a scent cloud and a pounding heart.

An hour later, Sid’s cherry-flavored elation had faded.

The beer tasted bitter and repulsive. The longer it stood in front of him, the warmer and more unpalatable it became. Sid wondered if he’d have been better off ordering a whiskey. Then he could have downed it in one swig and wouldn’t be nursing this bottle like a baby.

He looked at the bills lying in front of him. Homer G. Adams had introduced the new currency in record time, before he’d even been voted in as the Terran Union’s first administrator. At the end of July, he’d started distributing solar to the new citizens of Terrania. Before that, he’d even given it away to ensure that everyone had held the new currency in their hands. What had initially looked like the actions of a crazed old man became a true triumph over the subsequent next days and weeks.

From September, all workers in Terrania would be paid in solar. As the first traders set down in the city, offered food, alcohol, and daily goods in mobile vending carts, they received sales licenses only on condition that they offered their wares in solar. A short time later, the currency was accepted worldwide into the foreign exchange tables—and solar was born.

Sid lifted up a ten solar bill. Next to the large number 10, it

boasted an image of an astronaut with a bulky helmet and the *Stardust*. The magical thing about it was that the person on the bill changed when you turned it over. Humans, women and men, from all continents were depicted; with every turning of the bill, a new head became visible.

Adams had explained that this was possible thanks to a superior Arkonide manufacturing process. The color pigments were arranged and rearranged by tiny carbon tubes and nanocomponents. The energy for this process was drawn from the ambient temperature.

Sid had wondered how it was possible for Arkonide tech to have influenced life in Terrania so quickly. Every day there were new achievements in Arkonide-Terran hybrid technology.

A construction manager in Lakeside had explained to him that the *philosophy* of the Arkonide tech was in a different league. Whereas progress on Earth generally meant that a product became *more complex* for the user, the Arkonides *simplified* their concepts. Although ultimately hundreds or even thousands of years of research and development lay behind them, the technological devices became easier to comprehend, easier to use—and easier to adapt.

Sid slid the bill across the counter and placed the empty beer bottle on top of it. He'd lost his enthusiasm to speak with Cherry. The longer he'd sat alone at the bar, the clearer it had become to him that he was also alone on the subject of Goratschin. The whole world just had to open their eyes to recognize that a human nuclear or (for what it was worth) calcium bomb had no place in a peaceful city like Terrania, but the seemed to have just taken the murderer under their wing.

Sid got up, feeling ill. He'd felt like that numerous times over the past few days. Dr. Manoli had given him a checkup and found nothing. He put Sid's malady down to hormonal imbalances in his body caused by the major changes Sid had gone through in recent weeks.

He started walking to the exit, but stopped after three steps and turned to the large screen, which had the news running on it. He'd

paid it no attention until now, because most reports were about the unrest playing out across the globe. Sid found it strange that humanity still hadn't found the insight to realize they'd entered a new era where the local conflicts were over for good and they had to stand together.

The image of a Fantan was being displayed. Thick chains were wrapped around his body. Desperately, it tugged at them with its limbs.

In front of it was a pod with the date "October 2, 2036" displayed on it. The proof that this was a current recording. The Fantan had evidently failed to leave Earth along with the others of his kind.

Sid lifted a hand, pointed at the screen transparency, then pointed twice at his ear. The media sensor reacted instantly and Sid heard the voice of the newscaster.

...the group, which has not yet made a public appearance. All we know thus far is that its members reside somewhere in the Andes in South America. The world is on tenterhooks waiting to see how the Terran Union will react to their demand that alien technology be handed over to the group. Expert opinions are split: some point out that a government shouldn't allow itself to be blackmailed. Terrania doesn't share common cause with the Fantan and thus would not see itself as responsible for the extraterrestrial. Others disagree, seeing Rhodan's proclamation of humanity standing together as an admission of a shared responsibility for our planet.

Sid felt his stomach churning. The Fantan had kidnapped him along with Sue, Reginald Bull, and Eric Manoli, taking them into space as what they called Besun. An unlikely amount of luck was the only reason their escape from Fantan captivity had succeeded. Sid should have had every reason to hate the Fantan, but he didn't. They hadn't meant him any harm. They hadn't done him any harm. But this one left behind on Earth, chained and exploited. Harm was being done to him.

Sid covered his mouth with a hand and rushed to the exit. He just barely made it to the street before throwing up, one hand

propped against the shed wall. The contents of his stomach poured onto the dusty plasphalt in fits and starts. As the stomach cramps slowly abated, Sid kept standing there, trembling and wheezing. He closed his eyes and cried softly.

Everything had started so well. The development of his teleportation ability. Rhodan, Bull, and the others. The Earth's next step into a wondrous era. Sid had felt like a valuable part of a whole. Then Goratschin had shown up, and suddenly everything was different. Sid spat on the ground and wiped the rest of the stomach fluid from his mouth with the back of his hand.

And made a decision.

15.

Tatiana Michalovna

In the Past

Ferrol

The whole procession stopped. Two armored vehicles veered out of formation and accelerated. Ten meters away from where Crest and Michalovna stood, the two vehicles came to a halt. Their combustion engines growled and rattled.

“Out of the way, please!” a voice resounded from a hidden loudspeaker.

Crest took two steps forward. As per his role, he lifted the improvised hat from his head and delivered a deep bow. “If you’d allow me to introduce myself...” he announced in a loud voice. “They call me the Great Crestino! I travel from world to world to show you one of the most dangerous circus tricks in existence: mastery of the ferocious Hyvander!”

“That’s nice for you,” came the answer from the vehicle. “Please step aside so our caravan can proceed!”

“I request to speak to the esteemed ringmaster!” Crest called, putting his hat back on his head.

Michalovna struggled to keep her composure. Tricky though the current situation was, there was something deeply comical about the way Crest played a performer. It was down to his mannerisms, but his clothing too.

They’d split apart their damaged battledresses so that they had nothing obviously military or technological in nature on them anymore. They wore the gravity neutralizers around their necks as oversized pendants on a plastic cord. The energy was supplied by battery units hidden in the chest armor. The Positronics and

anything else they could use again at some point were in their knapsacks, which they'd attached under their arms. Michalovna had additionally hung Trker-Hon's bag on her shoulders, as he couldn't really carry a bag in his role.

"Please get out of the way!" commanded the irritated voice from inside the armored vehicle. "If you'd like to make an application, you can do it in Cullum, where the circus will be putting up its tents next!"

Crest straightened his collar. "Then we ask for asylum until we can receive an audience with the ringmaster!"

"Only towns recognize the right to asylum," came the reply. "We are a neutral organization belonging to neither side. We cannot offer asylum."

"Then we'll pay for the ride to Cullum!"

"You have money?"

"Of course!" Crest called imperiously.

"Show it to us!"

Crest spread his arms in apparent outrage. "Naturally, I am *not yet* in possession of the money! We will pay for the journey with the first fees we receive for our performances!"

The armored vehicle's door flew open. A Ferron in gray-and-blue camouflage got out and slammed the door closed. At his belt he wore two batons of differing lengths and a double-barreled firearm.

"You will step aside right now, old man!" he cried. "I could have run you over, but—"

At that moment, Trker-Hon leaped out of the bushes he'd been hiding behind. He made a wild roaring sound that Michalovna would never have believed him capable of.

The Ferron made a horrified cry, jumped two steps backwards, and reached for one of the batons. Before he could pull it out of its

holster, the Topsidan was already in front of him, grabbing him by the collar and bellowing right into his face.

“Stop, Hyvander!” rang Crest’s voice. In an unparalleled dramatic gesture, he raised both arms and showed Trker-Hon his open palms. “Draw back and spare the life of this man who is only doing his duty!”

Trker-Hon lifted the heavy Ferron into the air slightly and shook him so that he couldn’t grab his weapons.

“Back, Hyvander! Back!” Crest called.

Trker-Hon made a grunt-like sound before letting the Ferron go and drawing two steps back.

“How often have I told you not to scare strangers like that?” Crest asked reproachfully. Then he whirled around. “I offer my sincerest apologies. But now that you’ve seen the Hyvander in action…would you please notify your ringmaster that he can see the sensation with his own eyes?”

Slowly, the color returned to the Ferron’s face. He rubbed his aching neck, slowly stepping backwards as he did. “You’re out of your mind,” he said. “I’m getting back inside right now and will inform the caravan that the journey can continue. Then we’ll set off again—regardless of whether you, the animal, or the scrawny woman are standing there or not!”

Michalovna reached into Trker-Hon’s bag and pulled the weapon out. “We offer a Glowing Death as payment for the journey to Cullum and an audition with the esteemed ringmaster!”

The Ferron’s jaw fell open. Paying no mind to Crest or the Topsidan now, he rushed straight over to her and pulled the weapon out of her hands. He inspected it from all sides for twenty seconds, converting it from the rifle to the crossbow and back again.

Then he said, “All right. You get on with me and the old man can climb into the second vehicle. The animal, you can stow in our

cargo hold. I'll make sure you get to speak to the ringmaster."

"We have a deal," said Michalovna.

They used the journey to Cullum to learn more about the traveling circus and current events on Ferrol. The armored vehicle's driver turned out to be quite talkative. His name was Tupan and he had once worked for a military splinter group. To escape certain death after his desertion, he'd joined the most famous traveling circus on Ferrol: Moon Magic.

"It's a wonderful place," Tupan gushed. "Our world is rocked by death and destruction."

He reached under the dashboard and extended a telescopic antenna with a small bowl attached to it, then spat into the bowl. Michalovna was reminded that Ferrons didn't sweat like humans and Arkonides, instead cooling their bodies by spitting.

"Life's completely different in Moon Magic!" Tupan continued after the bowl had disappeared under the dashboard again. "It's a world of its own, filled with passion. The only place where you find happy Ferrons. The most wonderful part of all is that they give part of their happiness back to the people."

"What kinds of performers do you have?" Michalovna asked.

"Hmm!" Tupan replied. "Every possible kind. There are acrobats, animal tamers like your...hmm...companion, but also magicians and fools... And naturally the cripple parade!"

Michalovna furrowed her brow. "What's a cripple parade?"

"A parade in which exclusively cripples take part. The unfortunate ones who came into the world crippled due to the gamma radiation."

"Gamma radiation?" Michalovna echoed. A chill suddenly ran through her.

"You know, the radioactivity that spread after the four great bombs were detonated." He shook his head in confusion. "Surely you must know *that*. You and your companion were clearly affected by it as well!"

“Us? Why?”

“Because your skin is so pale, of course. On top of that, you’re much too thin. You’d snap if I touched you!” He let out a mocking laugh.

“We… We don’t come from this planet.” Michalovna hoped he’d be satisfied with that assertion.

For a while, he grew lost in thought—primarily over the question of whether he found her attractive enough to engage in a sexual adventure with her.

Michalovna was all too familiar with such trains of thought. It seemed it wasn’t only on Earth that men were the same everywhere. Even on distant worlds and in the distant past, they remained creatures of instinct for whom a mere smile was enough to convince them you had nothing better to do than hop in the sack with them.

Her thoughts turned to Trker-Hon, who was forced to bear up in the armored vehicle’s cargo hold until they reached Cullum. Michalovna recalled the moment when he’d undressed before her eyes and given her his clothes. The fact that he was standing naked in front of her hadn’t mattered to him or her. But the way in which he’d removed his eyepatch and then gently turned his head to the side so that she didn’t see his empty eye socket had touched her on a deep level.

Trker-Hon played along with the act. Even though he’d made a fuss at first, now he was giving his full commitment to portraying a tamed beast. But that moment with the eye socket… That had told her more about him than if she’d spent a full hour telepathically probing his mind.

“These cripples,” she said. “What…unusual *abilities* do they have?”

“How do you mean?” Tupan asked. “Apart from their limbs being put together wrong? Or having only one leg, but three arms to make up for it? Or the woman with four breasts? You’re right, of course: *that* is a special ability!”

“I was thinking more of tricks like being able to fly or disappear behind a curtain and appear again behind another.”

“Aha!” Tupan replied. “You mean the magicians. They do things like that. Crazy tricks. I got to watch while they rehearsed once. Totally crazy, let me tell you. By now, I know exactly which routines involve false floors and secret passages, or even have a twin appear whose existence is kept secret.” He explained the various routines and the rapturous excitement they provoked in the audience.

Michalovna dwelled in her own thoughts for a moment. Again, she was amazed at herself. She found it easy to accept the thought that she was on another world in another time.

She questioned Tupan about the current conditions on Ferrol. What he had to say fascinated and shocked her. Eventually, her maltreated body demanded its due and she fell asleep.

Michalovna jolted awake when the vehicle suddenly braked hard and drove off the road.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Orders from the boss,” said Tupan. “I don’t know why.”

Just then, the door was jerked open. A short, fat Ferron dressed in white with the most prominent chin she’d ever seen was standing in the dust of the street, deeply set eyes flashing at her.

“I have you!” he snarled triumphantly.

16.

Sid González

Lakeside Institute, Terrania

Sid felt tense and exhausted. To prepare for his journey, he'd had to make a few jumps between Terrania and Lakeside. In the process, he'd found out that he had less energy available than before.

He looked at the large bag sitting open in front of him. It was filled with clothes, but also with various bits of tech. He closed the bag, pulled out the shoulder straps, set them to the right length, and swung the bag onto his back. Then, he spent a minute just breathing in and out, trying to clear his head and ready himself for the subsequent jumps. He wasn't totally sure what would happen at his various destinations, so he had to be ready for anything...whatever that meant. In his case, no doubt teleporting away before the situation got too dicey.

Sid made the sign of the cross, asked the Mother of God to lend him her aid—and teleported.

It was dark in the pantry and decidedly cool. In the glow of his flashlight, Sid filled his bag with thin lunch packets prepared for the workers by the kitchen crew. The boxes had a warming mechanism and built-in cutlery. The rest of the space in his bag went to fruit juice bags and a three-liter cola bottle.

When he swung the bag back onto his back, Sid noticed a flaw in his approach. The bag was far too heavy. Just moving it around would waste a large proportion of his energy. The cola bottle went back where it came from.

The next jump took him to the Institute's second basement level. This was one big construction site. In the first phase of building they'd focused on the massive supporting pillars so they could get the building up as quickly as possible. Dividing up and outfitting the rooms would come later in a subsequent step.

With one exception. Sid concentrated, felt the crackling of sparks, and jumped straight into the armory. The new high-performance weapons with beamer attachments were neatly lined up along a wall.

He went past those. They were too big and heavy for him. All Sid needed was a weapon he could use to defend himself in an emergency—or at least give the impression that he could.

He reached for a small pistol with a laser attachment, an accompanying shoulder holster, and a pack of nine-millimeter rounds with laser-assisted aiming function. Sid crammed all of those into the outside pocket. He'd have to familiarize himself with the weapon during the journey. So far, John had never allowed him to attend combat training level three, which was a mandatory program for the older mutants.

Now came the hardest part of this endeavor. Sid had to find out where the bad guys were hiding.

Sparks in the darkness. Heavy air laced with a sweet perfume. Sid's heart started pounding faster in an instant.

"Wh-Who's there?" a nervous woman asked straight away. "Light!"

Blinded, Sid closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he was looking right into her face. Dark blonde locks framed it. Large eyes looked at him, the pupils unnaturally dilated, the mouth opened into a silent scream.

Sid could feel his throat closing up. The young woman was wearing a checkered nightshirt. A men's shirt that wasn't buttoned at the front and revealed a strip of pale, flawless skin from breastbone to belly button.

She noticed his gaze and gathered the garment together. Her expression flickered between shock and anger.

He defensively raised both hands. "Please, please," he uttered.

“It’s not what you think!”

“You’re Sid González,” the young woman discerned. “The teleporter they call Spark. What were you thinking?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. It’s just, I have…” He struggled for the right words.

“You’re looking for something,” said the woman. Her name was Caroline Frank, and she had a special gift like he did. But instead of being able to jump from one place to another or move objects, she had an unerring knack for finding things that had disappeared. “And you want to know where to look for it.” She looked at him for a moment. “Look for *him*. You’re trying to find him too, aren’t you? The Fantan.”

Sid felt as though the entire room were spinning around him. The heavy air, the woman’s perfume, her initial vulnerability that had transformed into strength in the last few seconds. “T… Too?” he stammered.

“Adams and Marshall were here last night to find out where the Fantan is being held.”

Confused, Sid shook his head. “Do you know if they already put together a team to free him?”

Caroline raised her hands innocently. With irritation, Sid noticed that this made her shirt slip. *Just don’t make any mistakes!* he urged himself.

“Caroline,” he said with an imploring voice, “I have to know where this Fantan is being kept hidden. Please give me the coordinates or describe where I can find him.”

Caroline Frank stared at him for almost half a minute. “I have to talk to John Marshall first,” she said after that. “I don’t know if I…”

Sid screwed up all his courage, took two steps towards her, and sat down on the edge of the bed. “Please, Caroline. You have to help me. My life depends on it!”

“Let’s say I do tell you the exact location. What would you do with the information?”

Sid looked her directly in the eyes. “I’d free him.”

“I’m told that you, Manoli, and Bull were kidnapped by the Fantan. Is this about freeing this one so you can then get your revenge on him?”

His eyes widened in horror. “I’d never do something like that! I want to free him and bring him here. That’s all.”

“Why don’t you ask Marshall if he’ll include you in his mission?”

“John is…” he began impulsively. Then he cleared his throat and continued, “No one cares about me anymore. I was on the verge of running away when I saw what was happening with this Fantan. I felt sad for him, seeing him chained up like that. So I thought I could prove my abilities by rescuing him.”

Caroline sighed. “I do believe you, Spark. But I don’t think this is really the kind of mission where you can prove yourself. The ones keeping the Fantan prisoner are hardened criminals. And you’re just…”

“Just what? A kid? Is that what you wanted to say?” Sid asked. He shot up. “Do you know how many dangerous situations I’ve faced in the last few weeks? How many people I’ve pulled out of dangerous situations? I’m the best teleporter John has. I’ll jump in and then back out again with the Fantan. Do you get it? *I’m* the guarantee that it’ll work. The others would be far too…”

He stopped short when he glimpsed the folded up piece of paper on Caroline’s nightstand. It was a card. A card that someone had marked with a red marker.

Caroline followed his gaze. “No, Sid!” she called, reaching out for the card.

“Your shirt’s open,” he said dryly.

The young woman looked at him, confused, put an arm over her

exposed region—and Sid jumped to her nightstand with a short-range teleport and snatched up the card.

"You don't have to worry," he said hastily. "I know what I'm doing." Then he jumped.

17.

Tatiana Michalovna

In the Past

Ferrol

The ringmaster was called Marlog and quickly proved himself a shrewd, cunning man. He played down the appeal of the Hyvander and presented himself as only moderately impressed with the routine where Michalovna put her head between Trker-Hon's rows of bared teeth while Crest made incantatory gestures. The lizard being was too lacking in fearsomeness for his liking, the tamer not stylish enough, and the assistant much too scrawny and feeble. But he was ready to "make an exception" and employ them "out of the goodness of his heart."

He assigned them a small wagon that she and Crest could inhabit together. For a suitable rental price, as Marlog expanded.

As their performance fee, he gave a figure that neither she nor Crest could compare with anything. Michalovna read in Marlog's thoughts that with the circus's only competitor, a variety show called Fireflower, they'd easily earn three times as much.

She negotiated him up to double. When she realized she was getting too close to enraged, she let up a little and demanded a larger wagon to make up for it, with an extra compartment for the "Hyvander" so that it "didn't lose contact with his tamer."

Marlog accepted, and thus the three officially joined Ferrol's largest traveling circus, Moon Magic. Their wagon turned out to be a wide tracked vehicle that rattled along Ferrol's half-destroyed streets with an astonishing lack of vibrations.

The journey to the next performance site took the entire day. While Crest lay in one of the two beds with a sigh and fell asleep straight away, Trker-Hon and Michalovna sat by one of the side

windows in silence and took in the sights of a war-torn world.

They went past villages where only every tenth hut was still standing. Behind the windows, they saw dozens of Ferrons cooped up and fearing further retaliatory strikes, waiting together for a new, better future.

“Tupan told me that Ferrol has fragmented into a multitude of domains. There’s hardly ever a ceasefire—if two parties unify on a peace plan, either a third party comes along or one of the two is playing foul and waiting for their moment to deal the death blow.”

Trker-Hon nodded. He’d put his eyepatch back on after moving into the wagon. Officially, he lived in the tracked vehicle’s cargo hold, but neither Crest nor Michalovna wanted to subject the Topsidan to that torment. For their public appearances, he’d play an animal again, but in their private space, he could relax.

“Now and again, a warlord manages to take over a larger area, but their hegemony never lasts.”

“Power is fleeting,” said Trker-Hon. “Because power needs solid structures to last. On a world like this, on the other hand, chaos reigns. The names of those who grasp for power are mostly written in water.”

“A pretty way of phrasing it,” Michalovna remarked. “From the look of things, Ferrol is due for a larger change. One of those warlords has proven himself unusually skilled. Beyond that, he’s not restricting himself only to occupying strategically important positions—he wants the whole planet, indeed the entire system.”

“Written in water,” Trker-Hon murmured.

Michalovna smiled. “I wouldn’t be so sure. I think the name of *this* warlord who will rule over all the others is sure to survive through the millennia.”

Trker-Hon turned his head. “What are you getting at, Michalovna?”

“Guess the name of this man who’s said to be doing all these

strange things."

The Topsidan knitted his brows. "If you ask me, there can only be one answer: Thort."

"Very good! You hit the nail on the head. If only half the things Tupan told me about this Thort are true, he must possess exceptional abilities."

"What kinds of abilities are you talking about?"

"For example, they say he can be in several places at once. And that nothing that happens on Ferrol and the other settled worlds escapes his notice."

"All-knowing, all-seeing, all-present?" Trker-Hon asked.

"Something like that."

"If he's managed to make friend and foe alike believe in these abilities, he really is in a unique situation. Can the Thort be found in Thorta?"

"Tupan believes so. But at the moment, Thorta is still being built. He's occupied a fortress that he's now having extended into his palace. A few hundred kilometers away from our destination of Cullum."

"A fortress," Trker-Hon murmured. "Interesting."

The circus was greeted in Cullum like a liberating army. Children screamed and shrieked; men and women came out of their houses and waved to them.

The local administrator showed them to an enormous field where sporting events had once been held. Controlled by the central steering unit, the circus vehicles arranged themselves into a large circle. By Earth standards, it could have fit five football fields inside it with room to spare.

Then a special wire was put around the outside of the mass of

vehicles, creating an electrical field on the outside of the vehicle fortress to keep uninvited guests away. After that, the workers put up three circus tents. To Michalovna's surprise, they resembled those seen on Earth. She dwelled on that for a while before satisfying herself with the explanation that the tent was the simplest form of portable housing and that there weren't many possible ways to make one. In the end, they had to involve poles, tent walls, and hooks.

"New here?" asked a croaking voice from diagonally behind her. "Don't think I've ever..."

The telepath turned around, startled. Not far from her and Crest, an ancient-looking man was sitting on a rickety chair. Gouty hands rested on the armrests. A stained cloth both concealed the Ferron's eye area and tamed the snow-white hair sticking up wildly in all directions.

"Yes!" he called. "I mean you. Come a little..."

Curious, Crest and Michalovna went over to the man. He beat his fists against the armrests in delight.

"You come from far away, I assume," he said instead of a greeting. "You smell nothing like the local bunch. More like..."

Michalovna waited to see if anything followed. But the Ferron had closed his mouth and was moving his head back and forth, as if he wanted to be completely sure that he would be able to understand her fully.

"I'm Crestino," said Crest after a short sideways glance. "Also known as 'the Great Crestino.' And this is my charming assistant, Tatiana!"

The little man snickered. "You don't appear to be of especially outstanding stature to me. You look to be..."

Michalovna shifted her weight from one foot to the other. The man's quirk of not finishing his sentences was getting on her nerves. What had he been about to say? *You look to be of average height?*

“And what’s your name, sir?” she asked.

“Oh, please forgive me! I’m used to everyone in the circus world knowing me. Some call me ‘Isach the Blind Man’—and in contrast to you, my good Crestino, the name is...”

Crest smiled. “Entirely accurate?” he asked.

“Yes. Exactly!”

“It must be quite difficult to live in a circus as a blind person,”Michalovna said. “There are a lot of changes, a lot of moving around. Do you have a special role that you serve here or activity that you carry out?”

“Me?” Isach asked. “No. None!” He snickered again. “No one would kick Isach, the old man, out of the... Usually, it’s established custom that only those who can earn their daily bread have the right to stay. But with Isach the Bold, they make an...”

“An exception?” Michalovna asked.

“Exactly. I’m old, you see. Very old. Too old for them to...”

While he searched for the word—or had already forgotten that a word was missing from his sentence?—Michalovna moved away from him and took Crest with her.

“What a shame,” said Crest when they were standing in front of their own wagon again. “It was just getting exciting. His special ability is age—do you see?”

“His special ability is a lack of sense,” she retorted, unmoved. “I tried to sound him out telepathically, but there was nothing there for me to sound out.”

“Well, sometimes even that...”

Michalovna looked at him, stunned. “Sometimes even what, Crest?”

He raised his hands. “I forget,” he said in an innocent tone.

She laughed. “All good. I understood the lesson.”

18.

Ivan Goratschin

Lakeside Institute, Terrania

A few hours earlier...

"You're completely sure that you want to push on with this scientific madness?"

"Totally sure, Doc."

Ivan Goratschin looked around in the hall where Fulkar was preparing the operation. The table he was lying on and the equipment installed around it seemed like nothing in the capacious room. In his mind's eye, he was on a bed in a temporary field hospital in Afghanistan. That hall had almost had the same measurements, but it had been filled with hundreds of patients.

An accident with combat gas that had taken out half a batallion. The incident had been covered up for political reasons. Goratschin had assumed that one of the people involved would go to the press sooner or later, but oddly enough, that had never happened.

"How will the operation work, Doc?" he asked.

Fulkar activated a display. The pearl-colored rectangle was like a window into another world. Invisible laser beams met each other in a field of highly ionized air, forming the image calculated by the central unit. The background turned dark brown. Multiple branching tracks rotated around a common axis and gained depth of field.

With his long, thin index finger, Fulkar pointed at the blurry network. "Your brain," he said. "Its own little cosmos with more than ten to the power of ten neurons. Our galaxy has ten to the power of eleven stars—but over an unimaginably larger space! While the suns of the Milky Way are only weakly connected with

one another through the laws of gravity and motion, every individual nerve cell has a direct interface with eight to ten thousand other neurons. The possible combinations resulting from that are staggering. The truly astonishing part is that this high-performance biocomputer only needs ten to fifteen watts to run all its functions. Less than...than..."

"A flashlight," Goratschin offered.

"Perhaps. By the way, per my investigations so far, your paranormally gifted brain requires up to sixty kilowatts per second per kilo of brain mass, i.e. a factor of four thousand, though this primarily depends on how many brain regions are hyperactive during deployment of your ability."

"I'm honored by your enthusiasm. But I'd rather know how you're going to—"

Fulkar straightened himself. "I was just getting to that. I can't explain the procedure to you without teaching you the underlying principles first. Now, as fantastic as the human brain's computational power may be, it's exploited only to a pathetically small degree. A normal person should be capable of recalling and understanding your people's entire collective body of knowledge. Instead..."

"Instead, most humans decide to live their lives instead of turning into computers. Right, Doc?"

"Let's move on from that," Fulkar relented. "Let's speak about the interesting question of where the para-gifts are localized in your brain and those of paramentally gifted people. I've determined that different areas of the brain are active depending on the gift. Mr. Marshall's mind-reading ability, for example, is detected primarily in the rear region of the cerebrum, where cognitive functions reside. But surprisingly, in both your brain and that of the telekinetic Anne Sloane, it's primarily the nerve cells in the thalamus, known as the relay station for the senses, which become hyperactive the moment you reach for your ability."

Goratschin furrowed his brow. "Why is that?"

“To put it simply, it’s the case that John Marshall must *think* to read thoughts, whereas you and Miss Sloane must essentially *see* to use your gifts instead.”

“Hmm. Anne told me that she can move matter even without directly seeing it. It’s harder, but not impossible.”

“A good argument. But you forgot the brain’s ability to *adapt*. You see, thanks to the tremendous network of neurons, the brain is capable of sharing functions with other regions. To outsource them there, so to speak. If the hypothalamus is damaged, for example, it’s possible for other regions of the brain to take over to get the vegetative nervous system working again. It behaves similarly in Miss Sloane’s case: where the hyperactive nerves in the thalamus push against their limits, the part of the frontal lobe that’s normally responsible for motor function suddenly becomes active. For this reason, your gifts are trainable, since ‘training’ is no more and no less than the neurons’ hyperactivity being spread to further areas.”

Goratchin nodded. “That’s why it’s not enough to cut out part of my thalamus to free me from my curse.”

“Your gift,” Fulkar corrected. “Call your gift what it is, patient! But you’re right. For that reason, I’ll need to carry out several operations to neutralize the hyperactive neuron strands.”

“Whatever, Doc. Please take your scalpel and get started. The sooner I’m free of my *gift*, the better.”

“You barbarian! Obviously I won’t cut you up with a stone-age knife. Instead, I have my little helpers!”

He raised a palm-sized mirror. Goratchin looked at it, uncomprehending.

“Complex nanomachines made of carbon tubes,” Fulkar explained. “Undetectable to the naked eye. An astoundingly advanced achievement of Earth’s technology. I’ll inject you, and then they’ll carry out their work, controlled remotely by me.”

“Then get started, Doc. I can’t wait.”

“I have to warn you again.” Fulkar leaned over him. “I can’t promise you one hundred percent success. I simply don’t have the experience with human neurons to understand all of your connections.”

“I’d rather end up paralyzed than live even one more day seen and used as a weapon.”

19.

Tatiana Michalovna

In the Past

Ferrol

They spent the next two days rehearsing their circus performance and obtaining information. They got to know the other performers. Most of them had shockingly little to report about the world they were traveling through, however.

Michalovna justified this as the traveling circus signifying a safe harbor from the permanent war on Ferrol. The less they knew about the horror the families and friends they left behind were subjected to, the better they could focus on their work.

Tupan, the driver of the security vehicle, visited them several times. As Michalovna determined from his thoughts, he'd decided that he didn't find her as appealing as women with Ferron dimensions. But she'd at least spoken to him and thus paid him more attention than any other woman in the last few months.

She told him several times, in a friendly manner, that she wasn't interested in going for a walk with him across the circus grounds. When she was just wondering whether Tupan would react better to a more percussive argument, and if the most sensitive spot on a Ferron man's body were in the same place as a human man's, Crest arrived and freed her from her predicament.

"Tatiana!" he called as he rushed over to her. "I have to speak to you right now! It's—"

"Oh, Crest," she replied. "Were you just with Isach?"

Crest took a deep breath. "Would you... Would you please excuse us a moment?" he asked Tupan.

The Ferron reluctantly complied, although he hung back a

moment as if he had something important to say.

“See you soon,” said Michalovna, looping arms with Crest and pulling him away. “What’s wrong?” she whispered once they were out of earshot. “You look agitated.”

“It’s Isach,” Crest blurted. “The question of his age wouldn’t leave my head. That, and the fact that you couldn’t reach him telepathically, made me ponder. That’s why I visited him just now. And he told me a story that was thoroughly unbelievable!”

“What kind of story?”

“You’re about to hear it from the man himself,” Crest replied. He gently urged her in the direction of the small vehicle where Isach lived in the company of two jugglers.

“Shouldn’t we make sure that Trker-Hon also gets to hear?”

“A good idea,” Crest praised her, “but I’m one step ahead of you, Tatiana!” He gestured to a thin wire that ended in a thumb-sized box attached to his “necklace.” “The Wise One has a com link to us. Can you hear me, Trker-Hon?”

The Topsidan’s voice came out of the box. “Loud and clear. “Nice of you to think of me, Tatiana. I was afraid you’d abandoned me in my cage.”

“I’d never do that, Wise One,” she whispered.

“Ahh!” crowed a hoarse voice at that moment. “Those footsteps could only belong to my new friends, Tatiana the Great and Crestino the Greater!”

“Isach,” said Crest. “Could you please share the story you told me with my assistant as well?”

“Hmm. The one with the enormous rollers?”

“Rollers?” Michalovna asked. “Now I’m intrigued.”

“Well,” Isach began, “it’s a few years back now. This was a

wonderful, thriving planet. Not as dark as it's..."

"Is there any way I could ask you to finish your sentences?"

Isach's head wobbled. "Does it bother you when I leave the end of the sentence to your imagination?"

"Well...yes, it bothers me!"

"Then from now on, I'll be sure to end my..."

Michalovna inhaled sharply.

"...sentences correctly," Isach finished. "But back to my story. I was still a boy. A handsome young boy who saw the world through large eyes. One day, my eyes caught a glimpse of something wonderful. Enormous metal rollers came down from the sky. Landed on my homeworld. I was there with my flock..." Isach paused. "One moment. But you see, if I was with my flock..."

He raised his hands, extended his fingers one by one, then folded them all back in. "I have to start again," he said. "When the aliens with the metal rollers came, I was already an old man. Grateful that I still had my eyesight and most of my teeth, I was just glancing at my flock when a distant sound of thunder made my gaze sweep towards the sky..."

Michalovna cast a glance at Crest. Isach seemed to be utterly insane. How could he seriously believe that anyone would be taken in by a story that he started in two contradictory ways? She was also annoyed that she still couldn't manage to read the old man's thoughts.

Crest looked at her, smiling. She would all too gladly have known why the Arkonide was subjecting her to this. Unfortunately, mind reading only worked with Crest in exceptionally rare circumstances. Now his head remained a firm stronghold that she didn't even bother trying to penetrate.

Then she realized what this was about. Crest had discovered a clue to the Planet of Eternal Life.

Crest saw the telepath's facial expression change. *Yes,* he thought. *Now she's got it.*

"I was very afraid," Isach reported. "I wanted to run away, but somehow my legs were frozen solid. My flock wasn't as unlucky as I was. The animals ran off in all directions. Meanwhile, one of the rollers landed right in front of me!" He raised both hands to depict a large shape in the air. "Like an enormous metal mountain, the roller loomed before me. Darkened everything. I died a thousand deaths. Then, suddenly, the roller opened, and beings came out..."

"Beings?" Michalovna asked. "What kind of beings? What did they look like?"

Crest couldn't help grinning. The Terran couldn't allow the old man even a single pause for effect.

"They looked like Ferrons, but also not. They came to me and said that I didn't need to be afraid. Then they left me alone as they unloaded something."

When he heard the Terran gasp for breath, the old man raised his hands defensively. "I don't know what it was. It was big—maybe. Or perhaps only small. I don't know. What I know is that one of the aliens came to me and asked me questions about my life. He didn't understand that I sometimes suffered from hunger because I didn't always have enough money for a piece of Trihan or a bowl of Solke. Then he asked me how old I was and how long I had left to live."

Isach rubbed his upper arms as if he'd suddenly gotten cold. "My answers to his questions made him ponder. He said it wasn't right that I was so young and yet had so little time left. Those were his words. I can still hear them inside me as if it were yesterday and not all that time ago!" He drew a deep breath. "Before long, the aliens went back into their rollers. My alien friend said goodbye as well. Before he left, he said the following: 'I wish I could give you a new life, but I can't. What I can do is give you a *long* life.' No sooner

had he said it than the world turned black. And when I woke up again…"

"The roller was gone!" Michalovna finished.

"Exactly! I went back to my village, and no one believed my story! They all acted as though they hadn't noticed the rollers. But that didn't matter to me. I know that I spoke with my alien friend. I know that I saw the rollers. It all happened just as I remember it! I'm not suffering from delusions. Otherwise I wouldn't have seen eleven generations of Ferrons come and go!"

The Terran sharply took in air. "You've done *what*?" she asked. "How old are you?"

"Oh, after the first three hundred years I stopped counting."

Michalvona looked at Crest with widened eyes. "How… How can it be that…"

Crest watched as the woman's mouth moved again, heard her voice even, but it was so distorted, that he couldn't understand a single word. Something else had suddenly overtaken his thoughts with a vengeance.

Hello, old friend, said a familiar voice in his head. *It's been a long time since we last had the chance to talk.*

20.

Sid González

Valle del Colca, Peru

Wheezing, Sid leaned against a eucalyptus tree. His heart was pounding rapidly. The cool wind brushed across his sweat-soaked face, making him shiver.

“I’m almost there,” he murmured. “Just another few hundred meters. I can do this!”

Sid looked up at the forest that had to be hiding the entrance to the kidnappers’ hiding place somewhere. He shouldn’t have jumped so often in the last few hours.

After the first part of the journey had been unexpectedly easy and smooth—he’d stowed away in a supercopter to Beijing, then a passenger flight to Lima—he’d gotten careless. When he’d finally reached Cusco after a bus journey of several hours, he’d planned to cover the remaining ground using teleportation. Two hours later, tourists had picked him up at the roadside, drained of all energy, and taken him to the hospital in Arequipa in their rental car.

It had taken him another three hours to work up the strength for the next few teleportations. In the hospital’s pantry, he’d eaten at least two kilos of cold pasta and corn muffins before he could tackle the last part of the journey.

So much energy—and he’d burned through it again already. Sid sank to the floor, burying his face in his hands. Why was everything going so badly for him since his return to Earth? He’d noticed it properly for the first time when Gucky woke up. But only now, as he took jump after jump, did he notice how great his deficits really were.

He opened his backpack and pulled out an energy bar he’d stolen in Beijing. Another error: he should have stocked up in Arequipa

instead of just rushing off. The feeling of having lost far too much time, and possibly arriving late, had spurred him on and switched off his common sense.

Just then, he saw a light among the conifers. Quick as a flash, he hid behind the eucalyptus. He fished his electronic binoculars out of his bag and held them in front of his eyes.

He saw a man with black glasses. His head tilted back, he seemed to be enjoying the warming rays of the sun. Behind him stood a crooked wooden hut, against which...

Sid increased the digital zoom on his binoculars. A double-barreled rifle was resting against the wall of the hut.

In an instant, Sid forgot about his tiredness. Slowly, he scanned the entire mountain ridge with the binoculars. Caroline's map indicated a cave system. Sid assumed that the Fantan's kidnappers had camouflaged the entrance to keep it from prying eyes.

When he'd still found no sign of any more of the criminals after nearly half an hour, he put his plan together. He had to wait there almost until night fell before the man picked up the weapon and disappeared into the hut.

Sid concentrated and teleported directly to the building's outer wall. He put an ear up to the weathered wood, strained to listen, but heard nothing but a distant scraping sound. Then he quietly walked around the hut, found a window, and carefully peered inside. It was empty. He considered jumping inside for a moment, but decided against it, went back to the door, and pulled on the handle.

The door squeaked open. Sid stayed still and counted to ten. Nothing happened. He bent down and took a look at the hut's wooden floor. Dusty footprints led from the doorway into the middle of the room, then stopped out of nowhere.

As silently as he could manage, he put one foot in front of the other. The floorboards creaked treacherously. He ignored it, focusing his attention on the boards where the footprints ended.

In a gap between them, Sid found the end of a leather strap. With two fingers, he pulled the strap out. Then he took another deep breath and pulled. Several boards of different lengths folded up. Beneath them appeared an illuminated staircase. *The lion's den,* he thought.

Sid took the bag off his back and pulled out the small pistol with the laser attachment. During his journey, he'd familiarized himself with the laser's functionality. He checked one more time that the magazine was loaded and there was a bullet in the chamber. He pushed the bag aside. He'd either pick it up on the way back, or—if he had no time to lose—leave it behind. Anything essential, he took with him.

Gingerly, he put his left foot on the topmost step. His shoe's soft sole didn't make even the slightest sound. With great caution, he took one step after another, stopping every so often to listen.

At the bottom of the staircase, a door stood half-open. A distant humming reached him that he couldn't interpret at first. It sounded like a defective refrigerator or a hydrogen-based generator, dozens of which had stood around Terrania during the construction phase.

Holding his breath, he took the last few steps and carefully spied through the doorway. He could see into a hallway maybe fifteen meters long ending in a silvery door.

The sound was coming from his right. And something else caught his attention too. Sid raised his head and sniffed. A fragrant scent wafted up his nose. His stomach growled immediately.

A steak, he thought. *Someone's fried a steak!*

Sid called himself to order. It was only logical that even criminals had to feed themselves. Especially when they were hiding out in the mountains for a long period.

With a light hiss, the silvery door opened. A man who looked like a typical Latino appeared. He was balancing a tray with several items on it. Another man walked towards him wearing a tall white chef's hat and a dirty apron with blue and white stripes.

“Did he eat, Paco?” the cook asked. As Sid had expected, he spoke in Spanish, Sid’s mother tongue.

“Not a chance,” the man replied.

Paco looked to be a few years older than Sid. A three-day beard adorned his cheeks. His long, smooth hair reached to his shoulders. On his left hand, with the tray, gleamed a golden wedding ring.

“But he spoke to me for the first time,” said Paco as he walked towards the cook.

“He did *what?*”

“Spoke to me,” Paco repeated. “But I didn’t understand a word.”

“An alien gringo.” The cook took the tray off his hands. “You should tell the boss about that.”

Paco nodded. “But only after my shift at the guard post.”

As the cook disappeared to the left, where the kitchen appeared to be located, Paco started approaching the door Sid was hiding behind. “Where’s Alejandro?” he called. “He has my rifle.”

“In the kitchen,” came the cook’s voice in reply. “Come on, I’ve made bocadillos. You can take one up with you.”

“Good idea,” said Paco. He turned around and went towards the kitchen as well.

Sid breathed again. That could have gone very wrong. But instead, he now knew that the Fantan was being held behind the silvery door.

He clasped the pistol with both hands. All he needed was a modicum of luck. If the next jump put him right in one of the criminals’ faces, he’d have to decide in a split-second if he’d jump again or aim his gun at them.

Sid focused and jumped through to the other side of the silvery door. Another hallway extended in front of him. Tiny light sources

gave a subdued glow. The floor was vibrating softly.

Breathing heavily, Sid lowered the pistol. The hallway was empty.

He went from door to the door. Some opened, while for others, transparent panes gave a view into the rooms. Most were filled with technical equipment. Enormous computer systems and monitors showing images of robotic entities. One room seemed to be set aside for power generation. Tremendous generators were working to supply the underground base with energy.

The only room he couldn't enter or peer into was at the end of the hall. Sid raised the pistol and teleported.

Compared to the others, this room looked enormous. A single beam of light illuminated the room's center. The rest faded to nothing in dark drabness.

Sid gasped in surprise. The beam was shining on a single cuboid made of glass or superplexi. Inside it was the Fantan. Sid could immediately tell that the alien was doing badly. His scaled skin looked dull and brittle even from this distance. The limbs were hanging down his body like limp twigs.

Sid looked around, searching the room for security measures. Either they were invisible or the kidnappers were relying wholly on the dual prison of the cuboid and the locked door.

"H-Hello?"

The Fantan didn't react.

Sid pulled the last remaining piece of chocolate out of his jacket pocket, removed the wrapper, and put it in his mouth. Hopefully he'd have enough strength to jump inside the cuboid to the Fantan, get him out, and then teleport as far from the underground base as possible.

Then he'd have to muster the strength to take the Fantan to Arequipa. There, he'd deliver him to the hospital and contact Terrania. In his imagination, he'd pictured taking the Fantan to

Terrania himself, but neither he nor the alien were up to that.

Sid took a few steps towards the cuboid, then stopped. It was resting on a round block made of dark metal. Did that have some security measure hidden inside? Sid looked closer. On its upper surface, diodes glowed on several electronic elements.

One way or another, he had to plan his jump so exactly that he landed inside the cuboid, then jump again immediately after. He had to be quicker than any potential traps that had been set up by the kidnappers.

Sid estimated about forty centimeters between the Fantan and the side wall of the cuboid. He holstered the pistol and turned sideways. Then, he took a deep breath and jumped.

The Fantan didn't react even slightly when Sid appeared next to him in a cloud of sparks. Sid reached out and touched the alien with both hands. He hadn't been mistaken: the skin felt ice cold. Several flakes rained down onto the cuboid's liquid-covered floor.

Sid focused. In his mind's eye, he saw the cornfield he'd passed by on his way there. That was where he wanted to jump with the Fantan. He concentrated and...

At that moment, a glaring light came on. Sid closed his eyes, blinded. A siren started wailing somewhere nearby. Sid raised a hand.

"Don't move!" a voice rang out in English. "You're not getting out of there. We have the—"

Sid jumped.

And was thrown back with full force. He, along with the Fantan's inert body, slammed against dark metal. His world burned. Jets of fire shot through his body. Every one of his cells seemed to blaze.

From far in the distance, he heard a sneering laugh. Between bloody welts, he saw a dark silhouette. A man.

Summoning all his mental fortitude, he moved his right hand to

the pocket of his leather jacket. His fumbling fingers found the grip of the pistol.

Sid felt the shadow coming back. This time, the faintness would take him along to the other, painless world.

A mutant's most important weapon isn't their gift, it's their will, he heard John Marshall saying deep within him.

He pulled the pistol out of his pocket and lifted his hand. The dark figure towered in front of him. Between the bloody welts in his vision, Sid saw the man's maliciously grinning face.

He pulled the trigger and felt the recoil. Heard the bang. The man's face dissolved—like the mirror image in a lake when you threw a stone into it.

Then it reformed. The man's lips moved.

Only just before unconsciousness seized him and dragged him along did the words become a sentence. "The Fantan ship's defensive shield doesn't just hold back teleporters, but projectiles too."

21.

Crest

In the Past

Cullum, Ferrol

Why? Crest asked in his thoughts. *Why are you speaking to me only now? I heard you briefly when we were fleeing from our assailants in the jungle. Why did you fall silent after that?*

You're very ill, the voice replied. *A lot is happening. Some of it can be explained, some of it not.*

Crest sighed internally. His extra sense was like the love affairs he'd cultivated in his youth. When the lovers were gone, he missed them, but when they were there, they got on his nerves remarkably quickly.

Sometimes I don't know why I took on the Ark Summia if I can't rely on you, extra sense.

The logic sector in his brain fell silent, feeling insulted. Maybe it was just trying to make a statement. Crest wondered if weeks or even months would now pass again before the artificially activated sector of his brain would get in touch again.

"Crestino?"

Only now did he notice that the Terran woman had spoken to him using his pseudonym. "Tatiana?"

"What's with you?"

Crest ran a hand across his forehead. Felt the cold, sticky sweat. "I... I need to lie down," he said. "I'm feeling a little weak."

Michalovna furrowed her brow. Then she turned to Isach. "Thank you for sharing this story with us. We'll come back to ask

more questions, if you're all right with that."

"Go ahead!" the old man croaked. "I have time. Plenty of time to..."

The Terran helped Crest get up. Inside his skull, all his thoughts were in disarray. Why had his extra sense come back at exactly this moment, when Isach had revealed himself as having lived for centuries? In what way were all these things connected? The transmitter in the past. Their presence on a world that had only just been pacified by the first Thort. A blind, ancient man. And their search for the Planet of Eternal Life.

"Tatiana!"

Crest looked up. The Ferron security guard they'd bumped heads with on their first encounter with the caravan had blocked their path.

"Tupan!" Michalovna uttered. "What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you, Tatiana. I have the feeling you're avoiding me. And it shouldn't be that way. I... I could show you everything here. I know Moon Magic inside and out. We... We'd be a good team, you and me!"

Crest felt the woman stiffen beside him. "Listen to me very carefully," she said. "We will *never* be a good team."

"Don't say things like that, Tatiana!" he protested. "I can tell that you like me. And I like you. Where's the problem?"

"The problem is that you're deluding yourself. I don't like you, Tupan. My feelings towards you are neutral at the absolute most."

"But—"

"No buts. And I know very well that the feeling is mutual. If you'd spent a little more time in the company of other Ferrons recently instead of polishing your extensive weapon collection, you wouldn't have to hit on a non-Ferron who's 'much too thin' and would snap if you touched her!"

Tupan's face turned dark blue in an instant. "You'll... You'll regret that!" he roared, and stormed off.

It happened when they'd left Cullum behind and were just setting up the vehicle fortress on the edge of the forest town of Tura'honir. No sooner had the central pilot parked their wagon and locked it in place in the undergrowth than the door flew open. Four security men stormed in with raised weapons and long sticks. The last of them had his hat pulled down over his face, but Michalovna recognized Tupan immediately.

"Come out at once!" one of them shouted. "All three of you!"

Michalovna's gaze shot towards the door of the adjoining room. Trker-Hon was in there using the shower.

Two of the men disappeared into that side room with raised sticks and rifles.

Crest, who was lying down on the bed, held the gravity neutralizer tightly in his left hand as he struggled to get up. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Shut your pale yap," Tupan snarled at him. "We're wise to you, you frauds!"

"Tupan!" Michalovna cried. "What makes you think we're—"

"Out! Now!" he bellowed. "The ringmaster wants to speak with you!"

There was a clatter in the adjoining room. Someone let out a yelp, then the two security men walked out, leading Trker-Hon with their sticks. The wire loops at the ends were cutting deep into the softly scaled skin at the Topsidan's throat.

"Is that really necessary?" Michalovna asked.

In Tupan's thoughts, she found impotent rage that had been unleashed by her brusque rejection. The Ferron felt himself her superior, so her words had injured his pride.

She, Crest, and Trker-Hon were unceremoniously shoved out of the vehicle. Two dozen Ferrons were already waiting for them. Tupan had left nothing to chance; he wanted as many eyes as possible to see what he'd discovered.

Marlog stepped forward. Since the ringmaster was barely a meter and a half tall, quite overweight, and equipped with very short legs, his "awe-inspiring" steps looked more laughable than impressive.

"A claim has reached my ears that our newest attraction is a deception!" he exclaimed. "If anyone has anything to say, they should do so now!"

Tupan stepped up. "Sir! It was me who uncovered this scandal! I saw this woman"—he indicated Michalovna in a dramatic motion —"and this...*being* having a conversation. This lizard is no beast!"

"How did you come up with this allegation?" Michalovna asked. "Do you have any proof?"

"Ha!" Tupan replied. "Of course! I made a video recording!" He pulled out a cube-shaped camera, pushed a few buttons, and held it in front of Marlog's face.

"Hmm," said the ringmaster. "I can see the woman and the Hyvander looking out of their vehicle's window and moving their lips. But I can't hear any sound!"

Tupan threw his arms in the air. "This clip doesn't need any audio. It's clear that the two of them are speaking in turn. Look: here she's asking him something, and now he's answering. No room for doubt."

Crest laughed and stepped up beside Tupan. "That's no more and no less than the new routine we're practicing! It's called the 'Talking Monstrosity.' We're playing with the audience's expectations. No one will anticipate suddenly hearing the Hyvander speak. But it's just an illusion. The words come out of a small speaker on the chain around his neck. That's why we've trained him to move his mouth and lips. To complete the illusion!"

“Lies!” Tupan insisted. “The lizard is no animal! Otherwise they wouldn’t live with it in the same wagon!”

“Total nonsense,” Michalovna retorted. “As with any tame Hyvander, the relationship with his trainer is very important. He has to live nearby or he’ll be unhappy!”

“But…” stammered the one of the men who were keeping Trker-Hon in place with their sticks. “When we captured him, he was standing in the wet room having a shower!”

Crest raised his hands in astonishment. “Your accusation is that we trained the Hyvander too well? Is that it? Mr. Ringmaster, I must ask you please—”

“You’re dirty liars! All of you!” Tupan cried. “And now you’re trying to talk your way out of it?”

He stomped over to the Topsidan and tore the wet eyepatch from its face in a single motion. Trker-Hon lowered his head.

“Why would an animal have to wear such a thing? Because its master can’t bear to look at the empty eye socket? With the ugliness of this…monstrosity, that surely holds no weight at all. I think it’s far more likely that he can’t stand it *himself* when people see him without the patch!”

Trker-Hon raised his chin. “Give me back my eyepatch!” he said menacingly.

All those around them were struck silent. Everyone one of them looked at the Topsidan, their eyes wide, as he slowly reached out his hand.

Tupan suddenly began to tremble. For a moment, he looked as though he’d pass out. Then he pulled himself together and whirled around only for Trker-Hon to grab him by the arm, quick as a flash, tear the eyepatch out of his hand, and push him aside. Tupan cried out, while two of the spectators jerked back and he plummeted to the sandy ground between them.

Trker-Hon put the eyepatch back on, yanked the sticks out of

both of his guards' hands, and pulled the nooses up over his head. Paralyzed with fear, the security men looked up at the lizard.

Slowly, Trker-Hon walked over to Marlog. "May I introduce myself?" he asked, unruffled. "My name is Trker-Hon. I come from another star system and have been stranded on this planet since my ship suffered an unfortunate accident. I was lucky enough to make the acquaintance of these honorable performers, and we agreed we'd join your circus."

Crest cast a nervous glance at Michalovna. The security staff were still surrounding them, all armed.

Marlog, the ringmaster, looked up at the Topsidan, his eyes narrowed.

"It was wrong to deceive you, Mr. Ringmaster," Trker-Hon continued. "But you must know that we had no dishonorable intentions when we—"

"The lizard can speak!" Marlog cried in a rapture. "It can really speak! What a joyous day! Why didn't you say in the first place that it can speak? We'll pack up our tents right away and journey on to Thorta! When the Thort sees the lizard, he'll lavish us with riches!"

22.

John Marshall

Lakeside Institute, Terrania

A few hours earlier...

"Dammit!" Marshall cried. "Why didn't you tell me right away?"

Normally, he always put a lot of effort into looking calm and level-headed. That was of key importance for the mutants at the Institute. Every day, something happened that fascinated and frightened his gifted friends in equal measure. A lot of things didn't work like they were supposed to on the first attempt. Things got broken. His first line of defense in helping the mutants was to demonstrate that *their* first line of defense could be to stay above it all.

But learning that Sid had vanished from Lakeside almost ten hours ago annoyed him to his core.

"I'm sorry," Caroline Frank said hastily. "But I couldn't reach you. That's why I contacted Fulkar."

Marshall gritted his teeth. "I was in a crisis meeting with Adams for half the night. An emergency call would have been put through."

Caroline lifted her hands. "I remember Fulkar saying he had to stay awake to observe Goratschin's condition after the operation. When I couldn't get in touch with you straight away, I turned to him. I thought he'd inform you. Please forgive me."

Marshall breathed out. "You acted sensibly," he said. "Forgive me for getting a little sharp with you. *The doctor* is a luminary in his field, to be fair. But things like that don't interest him one bit."

Caroline sighed. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

“Where is he right now?”

“Ever since I heard he wasn’t here anymore, I’ve been trying to sense him. But somehow I just can’t get a real grasp.”

“Does this mean your gift doesn’t work with other mutants?”

“I’m not sure. Dr. Fulkar hasn’t had time to analyze my gift in more detail yet. What feels more important to me is that Sid isn’t being sought out with the same intensity as, for example, the Fantan. The Fantan’s had half the world wondering where he’s hidden. I saw a thousand thought lines, all unified on the same point. It was so clear that I even knew he was inside the mountain.”

“So you’re trying to say that you can’t track down Sid because I don’t miss him enough?”

“Don’t get me wrong, Mr. Marshall. I have no doubt you’re worried. I’m just saying you’re not really asking where he is right now. You’re assuming he’s on the way to Peru. As a result, my instinct isn’t kicking in so strongly.”

“I’m sure you’re right. Can you still give me a rough idea?”

“Let’s see…” Caroline turned around.

On one of the walls of his office, Marshall had hung up two maps. One showed the Milky Way. A thick red arrow pointed to a spot on a spiral arm, far from the center. Above it was written in thick letters, “You are here!”

The other map showed Earth, with Europe on the left, Asia (including Terrania) in the middle, and the Americas on the right.

Caroline pointed to the South American Pacific coast. “He should be around here. But I…”

Marshall stepped up next to her. He said just one word. “Lima.”

The supercopter’s hefty rotor blades whirled. A deep rumble filled the flat building plot where, in the near future, Terran

spacecraft were supposed to take humans to the stars. Desert dust billowed up.

Anne Sloane, Wuriu Sengu, Tako Kakuta, Ariane Colas, and Betty Toufry clutched their packs as they ran in a crouch towards the copter's open door.

Marshall turned to Homer G. Adams. He had to raise his voice to be heard over the noise of the rotor blades. "You made the right choice!"

Adams made a face like he'd bitten into a lemon. "I don't know, John!" he called back. "I'd have been happier if the Peruvian government had given us official approval for a mission in their country. After all, that's why I spent two days negotiating with them and made you wait before deploying. We'll have more voices accusing us of autocratically installing a world government that doesn't heed the autonomy of the sovereign members of the Terran Union, as enshrined in the Union's constitution.

Marshall took off his sunglasses. "That charge isn't totally off base."

"Glad you still can still make jokes in the midst of a crisis, John."

"I didn't mean it that way."

"If you survive this mission, you can buy me a beer at the Rocketman and outline your proposal for how humanity is supposed to band together without the powerful people at the levers making a few concessions."

Marshall laughed. "You're on. Now, during transit, I'll—"

He stopped short. In the whirling dust, the silhouette of a tall, broad-shouldered man appeared.

"What's he doing here?" Adams shouted.

"No idea. But Fulkar reported that his first operation went successfully."

“Then he’s lost the ability to make things explode?”

Ivan Goratschin came to a stop in front of them and saluted. “I’m reporting for the mission, sir!”

“You’re not in the US Army anymore, Ivan!” Marshall called.

“I know, sir!”

“I didn’t request you for this mission. Fulkar said you need to rest up between operations!”

“I’ve just been told the operation went successfully,” Adams said. “Can you confirm that? Have you lost your gift?”

“It wasn’t a gift. It was a curse. And yes, sir, it’s left me. But I have to go on this mission.” Against the background of swirling dust, Goratschin’s face looked sharper edged and more resolute than ever. “I know well and good that my presence at Lakeside is the reason Sid went off on his own. If there’s anyone who has to be on this team, it’s me, sir!”

Marshall shook his head. “I don’t want to risk your health. Fulkar said—”

“With all due respect…you need me. These mutants’ gifts can set the world on fire. But they’re not soldiers. I’m trained in counter-guerilla tactics. I know warfare in hilly terrain like no one else in Terrania. I don’t need my mutant ability to free the boy and the Fantan.”

“We’re not waging war, Ivan!” Marshall objected. “Besides, we don’t know if Sid’s been taken prisoner. It has to be pretty tough to trap a teleporter!”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about!” Goratschin cried, irate. “You haven’t learned to think like the military. You *have* to assume that the boy will be taken prisoner or injured! A plan of action is only worth its salt if it’s adaptable to every scenario!”

Marshall bit his lower lip. He knew that Goratschin wasn’t wrong. He exchanged a quick glance with Adams.

Before Adams could object, Goratschin turned towards the supercopter and said, “I’ll get on board now and familiarize myself with the facts of the mission. I don’t want to be responsible for that boy’s death.” Then he stomped over to their ride.

Marshall nodded to Adams and ran, ducking, towards the copter, where Goratschin had already gotten on and offered him his hand.

23.

Tatiana Michalovna

In the Past

Ferrol

"What a joy for you to join me in my humble abode!" said the ringmaster, lifting his cup.

Michalvona had already glanced around and knew that Marlog's stately wagon was anything but humble. However, just as Crest and Trker-Hon did, she played the game by the ringmaster's rules. It would be foolish to put up barriers between themselves and the man who could open the way to Thorta.

They toasted, wishing each other "great success" for the upcoming performance at court.

"I have a question, esteemed ringmaster," Crest said. "Have you already had a chance to meet the Thort in person?"

"The very thought of it!" exclaimed the short Ferron. "I've never met anyone who even *knows* anyone who's seen the Thort with their own eyes. Or with their own eye, in your case, dear Trker-Hon."

Marlog had evidently still not figured out exactly how to behave towards the Topsidan. Michalovna knew that he got nervous when Trker-Hon was nearby. But since the lizard being was the one who could get him into the Thort's court, he had to like it or lump it.

"But you do know what they say about the Thort?" Crest asked.

The ringmaster skewered a piece of meat, dunked it in a sizzling blue sauce, and put the whole thing into his mouth. Michalovna knew that the population on Ferrol primarily lived on a diet of hard root vegetables that were easy to farm and relatively robust. Meat was an extreme luxury in times like these. Another advantage for those who lived in a traveling circus that included, among other

things, an extensive zoo.

"Well," Marlog said with his mouth full, "if more than half of what they say about the Thort is true, it's a crying shame that I didn't discover him when he was still a child. He would have been Moon Magic's star attraction!"

Crest exchanged a quick glance with both the Topsidan and Michalovna. If the Thort really was a person with extraordinary abilities, it led to the temptingly obvious conclusion that he could be helpful in their search for immortality. After the exceptionally long-lived Isach, this was their second clue.

The third clue was one they'd already discovered in their past—the future, in other words: the transmitter that stood in the cellar vaults of the palace in Thorta. True, they didn't know exactly when it had been installed there, but Crest and Trker-Hon were in agreement that it had to exist already. Only later would the Thort give it to the Arkonide Kerlon as thanks for his intervention in battle on the Thort's side. Kerlon would bring it to Earth and hand it over to his commanders. They, in turn, would place it in the underwater dome at the bottom of the Atlantic. And ten thousand years later, Crest, Michalovna, and Trker-Hon would go through that transmitter, setting out on their search for the Planet of Eternal Life.

"This will be an exceptional performance!" Marlog raved before scooping a pile of strong-smelling roots, glowing with a bluish hue, into his mouth. "Do you already know how you're going to alter your routine so that the speech of the...the...well, of you, my dear guest, really wows the audience?"

"Well." Crest set his cutlery aside. "We thought we'd start off with a special—"

Just then, the door was yanked open. A strikingly tall and equally thin Ferron burst in.

"Forgive me, Mr. Ringmaster! But something quite incredible has happened! A sensation!"

“More important than a peaceful meal with my honored guests?”

The thin man stopped as if he’d run into a wall. “Of… Of course not. What I mean to say is that I’ll leave it to your wisdom as ringmaster to decide whether I acted rashly.”

Marlog rotated his chair and sat with his legs wide. “Then tell me already!”

The man took two deep breaths, then said, “A ball that spits fire descended from the sky! It intervened in one of the Thort’s battles and ravaged his opponent!”

The ringmaster turned pale. “What? That can’t be true!”

“It can. The Thort has gained a powerful ally. Aliens from another system—like that lizard there! With their enormous sphere, he can rule not just Ferrol, but all the worlds.”

Marlog shook his head in confusion. “Did… Did this information come through the news channels?” he asked.

“In the news, they’re only reporting that there have been inexplicable phenomena at theaters of war, but no details. We were informed by the palace directly!”

“Excuse me?”

“The palace wants to seize this moment to demonstrate the strength of the Thort to all eyes and ears. In two days, an enormous celebration will take place in Thorta, where the Thort will be proclaimed the ruler of all Ferrons. In light of his new instrument of power, no one will be able to dispute his claim to sole rulership!”

The ringmaster’s jaw quivered. Several times, he turned to the side to spit into his bowl. “In… In two days, you say…” he stammered. “That… That would mean that we…”

“Could arrive at court in time,” the thin man continued. “And we’ll do just that! Moon Magic has been selected to honor the Thort and his new ally by presenting the best routines from our current program at the edge of the ceremony!”

Marlog let out a shriek, leaped out of his chair, and for a moment looked as though he wanted to hug the thin man. “Did you hear that?” he cried. “The Thort is going to be the sole ruler, and *we’re* going to feature in his coronation! What a joyous day!”

Michalovna took in the scene without moving, only now and then reading a wisp of a thought from the participants’ heads. She didn’t know if this news was good or bad for them. All the hubbub of the celebration might make it easier for them to look for the transmitter in the palace—but it could also make it harder if security was tightened.

Suddenly, she heard Trker-Hon’s concerned voice. “Crest, are you all right?”

Michalovna’s first impulse was to correct the Topsidan for not using Crest’s pseudonym, but then Trker-Hon’s anxious tone echoed in her mind. She spun around.

Crest was hanging from his chair more than sitting in it. His face was pale as chalk. He was trembling and swaying perilously back and forth. Trker-Hon and Michalvona both grabbed his arms at the same time to stabilize him.

“Wh... What’s the matter?” she asked, worried.

Crest wheezed, his throat rattling. “I... Just a little...fainting spe...”

His eyes rolled, and Michalovna could see the strength drain from his body. Her gaze fell on the disguised gravity neutralizer. A tiny diot was blinking in a deep shade of orange.

“Quick! We’ll take him to our wagon!”

Trker-Hon agreed and took the Arkonide under the arms.

“What’s wrong with him?” the ringmaster cried.

“It’s all the excitement,” Michalovna replied.

“I must admit I also felt awfully faint for a moment when I heard

the happy news!"

"I have him," Trker-Hon said. He laid the Arkonide over his shoulder like a fragile doll.

"You do realize, however, that we have our big performance in two days?" Marlog asked. "By then, the routine must be ready and Crestino back on two feet."

Michalovna looked up briefly, but decided it was better not to say anything else. She nodded to the ringmaster and helped Trker-Hon get Crest to their wagon.

When they got there, they laid him down on the bed. Trker-Hon set about replacing the gravity neutralizer's energy cell.

Michalovna got towels and fresh water and cooled Crest's forehead, which had grown hotter. The Arkonide's eyelids were flickering erratically. Again and again, Crest twitched, opened his mouth as if he meant to say something, then closed it again.

"What do you think is wrong with him?" Michalovna asked.

"Timing-wise, the fainting spell coincided with learning that we'd perform during the coronation. Then, on top of that came the neutralizer breaking down."

"Maybe he couldn't tolerate the food?" she asked.

Trker-Hon placed a hand on Crest's stomach. "He hardly ate a thing. Besides, his stomach activities feel calm to me."

"The cellular disease he was diagnosed with?"

"Crest has frequently gone to lie down over the last few days. I fear he's not keeping us updated about the state of his health. It could be that he's doing worse than we suspect."

Michalovna looked down at the pale, almost emaciated figure. "What is it that you know and don't want to tell us, old man?" she asked.

24.

John Marshall

Valle del Colca, Peru

For the last ten kilometers, the supercopter's Chinese pilot took the vehicle down to an altitude of eighty meters. During transit over the Pacific, Adams had notified them that the Peruvian government would "tolerate" their presence.

"Furthermore, they insist that we hand over the kidnappers to them, should they survive," Adams had explained. "I'll continue to negotiate this point, however. These fellows may be hidden away in the Andes, but their activities are directed against the Terran Union. For that reason, we must discuss what will happen after the arrests. Their demands are only for us, in the end, not any other nations."

Marshall knew that with Adams, the matter was in good hands. The short, hunched man worked astounding wonders every day. He seemed to be as gifted in the world of state leadership and international relations as he was in his financial dealings.

Marshall looked at the faces of his mutant strike team. Many of them were very young. Among them, Goratschin looked like a square-built specter from another era.

On the way, they had gone over the situation at the launch site; by now, it was water under the bridge, and Marshall was glad to have an experienced military man he could count on. Goratschin had a calming influence on this pool of nervous young people, exuding self-assurance and resolve.

They had spent the past few days and weeks not only developing the mutants' gifts, but also making them mentally ready to deploy. But since mental strength went hand in hand with personal experience, there was no way around letting them get a taste of the action at regular intervals.

Ariane Colas's special gift belonged to the olfactory realm, actively as well as passively. She could change her body odor depending on mood and had a superhuman-level enhanced sense of smell. However, Marshall wasn't expecting those gifts to come in handy. Instead, they were likely to be leaning on an ability possessed by no one else in the group: her native language, Spanish. No translation device could make up for this advantage. With the possible exception of the new translators that hooked up directly to the wearer's nervous system. However, those were prototypes that weren't widely available yet.

The supercopter landed half a kilometer from the area where the kidnappers were holed up. As they'd discussed beforehand, Kakuta jumped into the hut that Caroline Frank had marked on the map, taking Wuriu, who could see through walls. Two minutes later, the two mutants came back.

"It's a bunker facility surrounded by solid rock," Wuriu reported. "I could make out the rough shape, but the deeper it went into the ground, the less clearly I could see."

"Can you reproduce it roughly?"

"Of course, sir!" he replied.

He took the pad Marshall held out for him. As he'd practiced hundreds of times at Lakeside, he generated a three-dimensional image of the facility using an app developed especially for him.

A concealed staircase led down from the wooden hut to the actual base. The basic structure consisted of two main hallways at right angles to one another. Connected to those was a series of rooms.

"As the rooms went farther north, it got harder for me to see anything specific. Electrical fields blocked my view." He pointed to the area in question. "Which is why I think that's the heart of the facility."

"My goodness," said Anne Sloane. "I never thought it would be so big. How deep does it go?"

Wuriu shook his head. “I’m afraid I don’t know exactly. Another staircase leads down from the western hallway. I couldn’t see anything down there, though.”

Goratschin picked up the pad and took a look at the three-dimensional sketch. Then he nodded. “I think we can stick to our original plan.”

“I agree,” Marshall replied. “Does everyone know what they have to do?”

He took a glance at the assembled row of three women and three men. They were all wearing tailored deployment suits emulating Arkonide battledresses. Marshall wished they had the originals available, but humanity’s supply of the Arkonide suits was running low.

The suits were ten thousand years old, so mechanical fatigue was gnawing at them. One serious mission, such as the one against Monk, the anti-mutant, was enough to severely limit their further use. The few that were still fully operational were needed on the *Tosoma*, on board the *Nesbitt-Breck*, and in the Venus refuge, where they fulfilled a secondary function as space suits.

The Terran suits couldn’t hope to compete with their Arkonide inspirations; however, they were molecularly strengthened and would offer good protection against bullets from handguns if it came to it. The engineers had also built an exoskeleton into the suits’ skin that had a strengthening effect on the joints and muscles and would provide additional defense against physical impacts.

In their hands, the team held rifles with beamer attachments. Marshall hoped they wouldn’t have to open fire against people.

“Are we all ready to go?” he asked.

They nodded.

“Yes, sir!” said Goratschin.

“Pilot!” Marshall ordered. “Take us up to point alpha!”

The pilot nodded and brought the supercopter up into the air. Within a few seconds, they reached the wooden hut. The copter's side door automatically slid aside.

Ivan Goratschin jumped out first. From the ten-meter height, he dropped like a stone onto the hut, broke through the ceiling, and disappeared. Two seconds later, he gave the all clear over the helmet coms.

Each in turn, Wuriu and Colas leaped down. Both landed on the roof without breaking through like the 130-kilo Goratschin. On all fours, they crawled over to the hole and dropped down.

Marshall followed last. The suit cushioned his landing as if he'd fallen from two meters rather than ten. He jumped down through the hole and landed next to Colas.

Goratschin had already gained entrance to the hidden staircase. He formed the vanguard, his boots clunking against the steps.

The mutants followed him, similarly going out of their way to make enough noise to be noticed in the facility. John Marshall brought up the rear, his telepathic sense directed towards the room below them. He picked up fragments of Spanish words. Images that fluidly turned into English words in his head.

One thought rose up out of the tempest of thoughts, was more intensive than all others. It centered on a technical apparatus. A...

Marshall flinched. "Goratschin!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "Stop moving! Now!"

Marshall raced down the steps, brushing past Wuriu and Colas. Goratschin had almost reached the hallway. He raised his weapon.

"Stop!" Marshall cried.

But the giant didn't hear him.

It was as if a second reality had replaced the here and now. Where moments earlier a plain simple lamp had lit the hallway's

man-made floor, suddenly a pale moon hung over a rocky valley he'd never wanted to return to.

In a few hours, it would be light.

Goratschin saw only fleeting shadows. If the fighters had night vision equipment, that was a death sentence for Lieutenant Hardy and him.

How many were there? Two, four, eight dozen Taliban?

"Zanawar!" one of them shouted.

A second followed his example, then a third, a fourth, and then it rang out from a hundred throats at once. "Zanawar! Zanawar! Zanawar!"

He knew they meant him. Zanawar—that was what they called him.

"Leave me here," came Hardy's brittle voice in his left ear. "Alone, you'll make the escape, Sergeant! Listen to me. This is an order!"

"I'm sorry, sir," Goratschin replied, "but you'll have to write me up for disobeying an order from a superior officer!"

"Zanawar!" shouted the Taliban fighters as if with one voice. "Zanawar! Zanawar!"

Carefully, Goratschin laid his injured superior officer on the ground. Then he threw his rifle aside before taking off his helmet and dropping that too.

"I'll show you what a real Zanawar is," he muttered.

With his mind, he reached into the mass of Taliban fighters, chose one, felt the calcium crackling in his thoughts, and squeezed.

A quick, explosive flash lit up the valley. A fountain of black water gushed above the crowd. Then the thunder rolled in. Frenzied shouting.

Goratschin got to work on the next one. Concentration. Explosion. The brief flash showed him the next victim. Bearded men with cloths wrapped around their heads.

They died.

The screams reverberated. So much blood, black in the moonlight. So much death, and he was the one sowing it.

For a Zanawar knew no mercy, no clemency. Only his own survival instinct, to which all else was subordinate.

A blow hit his neck. And another.

"Goratschin!" came a voice. "Stay still!"

Confused, he did as the voice demanded. The other reality disappeared as if someone had pulled back a curtain.

He found himself in the hallway again. Four men with rifles were rushing towards them, shouting in Spanish. But John Marshall, who had clung to him, wasn't looking at these foes, but up at the ceiling.

Goratschin saw the trapdoor that had opened up. Recognized the weapon barrels pointed almost directly at them. A single step would have been enough to be standing in their firing line.

Marshall's face jerked about. He let go of Goratschin and raised his arms.

"Go!" he murmured. "If you feel even a fraction of your gift inside you...now's the moment to find it!"

Goratschin looked into the faces of the assailants slowly coming towards them, their weapons threateningly raised. One of them was wearing a dirty apron and a tall chef's hat.

"I..." he murmured. "I can't. It's gone."

As if these were the magic words, Tako Kakuta, Betty Toufry, and Anne Sloane appeared behind their attackers. Invisible hands grasped the weapons along with arms and legs, sending all of it whirling through the air. The cook roared as if being skewered alive. The assailants dropped to the floor like stones. The rifles flew into the hands of the two telekinetic women.

Marshall let out the breath he'd been holding. "Good work—but a little too late for my liking. Ariane!"

The short woman with long brown hair and striking makeup stepped over to one of the men, grabbed him by the collar, and lifted him up with seemingly no effort at all.

Marshall looked at Sloane. In truth, she was holding the man up with her powers.

Colas spoke to the man for twenty seconds without taking a breath. Marshall understood only a few individual words and sentences: *Dónde está el extraterrestre?* "Where is the extraterrestrial?"

The man replied, but it didn't appear to be what Colas had expected. She repeated her questions.

Marshall felt his way into the man's thoughts. Saw the images that arose in his mind.

"I know where he is," said Marshall and Betty Toufry practically in unison.

He looked at her. "At the end of the northern hallway," she continued.

Sloane stepped forward. "Let me handle it!"

Colas let the man go. He glided through the air as if swimming through a cave filled with crystal clear water.

Sloane hurried after him with confident strides.

Marshall looked at Goratschin. "Are you okay? What was up with you just now?"

"Nothing, sir. Won't happen again."

As if to prove that he'd moved past the incident, he pulled out several sets of handcuffs and passed them on to Ariane Colas. She nodded and bound the men's hands and feet together.

Goratschin and Marshall hurried to the first connecting door. The man being carried by Sloane shouted, complained, cursed, and whimpered in varying orders. He could do nothing in the face of her mental powers. His right palm rested on the hand scanner, and the door opened.

“Very good,” said Marshall. “This way, we don’t have to overburden Mr. Kakuta.”

Ariane Colas and Betty Toufry hurried over and restrained the last remaining foes.

“Wuriu, what do you see?” Goratschin asked.

The short man with spiky black hair walked along the hallway. “I see labs, generators, huge server farms…but past there, I can’t get anything.”

He extended an arm to indicate the end of the hallway. Another door with another scanner.

“Anne, don’t forget our door-opener, please,” Marshall said.

“Already on it.”

She repeated the same play. The man’s palm barely graced the sensor before the door glided open.

They stepped into a larger room. Much larger. It was mostly shrouded in darkness. A single beam of light shone on two immobile bodies.

“Oh, God,” Sloane uttered.

Marshall stepped up beside Kakuta, who had similarly frozen in place as if he’d hit a wall. They were all staring at the same point.

There lay Sid González. He was wearing his new leather jacket. One arm was resting on the cylindrical body of a Fantan, strangely haggard and on its side.

“Are they dead?” Kakuta asked.

“Hmm,” said Marshall. “I... I can’t feel either of them. It’s as if...”

Goratschin knew immediately what had happened. “They’re behind an energy shield. Don’t you see it?”

He pulled a flashlight out of his belt and pointed its beam at the two bodies. In the middle of the room, flickering grew visible on a flat plane.

“Shine your flashlight at the surface they’re lying on!” Marshall ordered. “Do you see that metal? That’s no normal floor. That’s the top of a Fantan flounder!” He turned to the two telekinetic team members. “You have to find the shield generator and disable it with your powers. Can you do it?”

Sloane drew a slow breath. “I don’t know,” she said, doubt clear in her voice. “My attempts so far with Fulkar weren’t very promising.”

For two minutes, the two women struggled in vain. Then Sloane threw up her hands and massaged her temples with a grimace. “It’s not going to work. No chance. We have to—”

Before she could finish her sentence, another spotlight abruptly switched on. The light fell on a corner of the room.

Goratschin had raised his weapon and gotten down onto his left knee before any of the others had even reacted.

In the corner stood a storefront mannequin. It was wearing black pants and a baggy white woolen jumper. With its painted-on eyes, it looked past them into the middle distance.

“Welcome to Earth’s new nerve center,” came a strangely lifeless voice from the corner where the doll stood. “We’re very glad that you’ve found your way to us.”

25.

Tatiana Michalovna

In the Past

Ferrol

Only when the circus had almost reached Thorta's gates did Crest awaken from his stupor. Trker-Hon had tended to him without rest, while it was Michalovna's task to search for medicine and nutritional supplements that Crest's metabolism would tolerate.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

The elderly Arkonide attempted a smile. "As if I'd been flung back to the past by a time machine and had to live out wondrous adventures there."

"He can still make a joke," Trker-Hon said. "That's a good sign."

Crest rubbed tears from the corners of his eyes. "I'm afraid it's not a good sign," he said. "We have a problem!"

Michalovna sat down next to him on the bed. "What kind of problem?"

"Do you remember what Marlog's staff said about the unexpected ally? Now, this person can only be the Arkonide Kerlon da Hozarius, and the ship can only be an auxiliary craft from the *Tosoma*. It all matches Ferron lore!"

Michalovna shrugged. "Then we've landed at exactly the point in the past when big changes were on the horizon. What's so bad about that?"

Trker-Hon sat next to the telepath. "Talk to us, Crest. Tatiana and I have talked about almost nothing else yesterday and today."

Crest sat up in bed and took the water bowl Michalovna held out

to him. “It’s Kerlon. The danger comes from him. Under no circumstances can he see us! He’d immediately recognize me as an Arkonide and you, Tatiana, as a human!”

She exchanged a brief glance with Trker-Hon. “Why not? Kerlon is a man with ideals. He helped the Thort end the bloodshed. Against orders, no less! He told Perry Rhodan so himself!”

Rhodan had met Kerlon in the present when he’d been stranded in the Vega system with some companions. On a moon called Lannol, the Arkonide had set up a facility that he’d called the “Bastion.” Kerlon himself had become an old man; through long phases of cryosleep, he had held onto his life for over ten thousand years—but not his wits. Kerlon had reported to Rhodan of his intervention in the Ferrons’ war out of sympathy, saying that the first Thort had shown his gratitude by giving him a transmitter. Shortly after, the old man had died.

“And that’s the problem!” Crest said, his voice shaking. “He didn’t mention anything to Rhodan about meeting an inexplicable Arkonide and human woman. Kerlon didn’t encounter us—and as such, we cannot encounter him under any circumstances. It would irrevocably change the past, and thus the future!”

“I don’t understand,” Michalovna said. “A few days ago, you gave us a whole speech about time paradoxes. You seemed to assume a principle of ‘it happens because it happened’—that the present would have changed as soon as we traveled back along the timeline. Sure, during his conversation with Rhodan, Kerlon *didn’t yet* know about us. The knowledge was put into his memory as soon as we were thrown back in time by the transmitter.”

“Don’t underestimate the power of dimensions!” Crest urged. “With our journey through time, we created an alternative time plane. Naturally, we can hope for now that the two planes merge together when we travel forward in time. But what will happen if the information that Kerlon encountered time travelers in the past prevents us from using the transmitter? There would be two mutually exclusive scenarios. And thus the two time planes would push away from each other instead of merging together again.”

Michalovna looked at the Arkonide, baffled. “What could the consequences be?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we’ll just disappear as if we’d never existed, and no one will remember us. That would be the pleasant option.

“What?” the mutant asked. “The *pleasant* option? And what would be the unpleasant one?”

“The two time planes, the temporal axes, could rupture and cease to exist. We’d have destroyed no less than two universes.”

Trker-Hon made a suffocated sound. “Don’t you think you’re stretching this thought exercise a little too far? Especially as we can’t be one hundred percent sure that Kerlon told the truth. He lost his mind after thousands of years of cryosleep. How can we be certain that it’s not a story he overheard somehow? How can we be certain that the Thort’s mysterious ally really is this Kerlon?”

Crest sighed. “Naturally, our deliberations must be based on hypotheses. But be honest: can we take the risk, even if it is vanishingly small?”

“Crest,” Trker-Hon said in a serious tone, “I won’t answer that rhetorical question. But I think you’re ignoring a key point in this whole matter: we’re on a search for immortality. And what, if not time, has so far proven itself *the* constant in the setup of the great puzzle: eternal life, time travel? Now it’s joined by the subject of time paradoxes. Don’t you see, Crest? Someone wants us to come to grips with time in all its facets. On the way to the Planet of Eternal Life, we’re supposed to learn! It’s all part of the puzzle!”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Crest replied. “Perhaps, though, you’re mistaken about a rather crucial point. What if it’s not just a thought exercise we’re supposed to dabble in? What if this is the real test, to find out how responsibly we deal with a matter like this?”

“Once again, you—” The rest of his sentence was swallowed up by deafening thundering and roaring. Trker-Hon turned around and hurried to the window. His brawly body flinched twice. “Crest,

Tatiana, you have to see this!”

Perplexed, Michalovna helped Crest stand up. Together, they walked over to the window.

There it hung in the air: an enormous metal ball that glowed and sparkled in Vega’s light. From the equatorial ring nestled around the spacecraft, the impulse drives’ jet fingers blazed.With majestic indifference, the huge spacesphere floated above them.

The hull boasted a sequence of letters that Michalovna could read with no effort at all. “*Tosoma X*.” Kerlon’s ship.

“Listen, Crest,” Trker-Hon said without taking his eyes off the ship. “I agree with you that we can’t take any unnecessary risks, whether that’s part of the great puzzle or not. That’s why we should break away as soon as we get to Thorta. We’ll stay hidden for a few days and wait for Kerlon to fly away before we start searching for the transmitter.”

Michalovna nodded. “Sounds like a smart plan! Crest?”

The Arkonide nodded as well. “That’s what we’ll do.”

They gathered up food and stowed it along with the leftover suit tech in their packs and in Trker-Hon’s bag. Impatiently, they waited to finally reach the city. In the meantime, they went through possible escape methods, but agreed in the end that they’d have to improvise since they didn’t know the lay of the land in Thorta.

When dusk fell, they arrived at the city’s towering walls, which were a gloomy and threatening sight in the dark sky.

“Thorta,” Crest whispered with fascination. “An ancient castle as a new governmental palace, enthroned on a hill where a city nestles up against it. It’s being expanded and strengthened—as a symbol for the new Ferron era. Built to stand the test of time.”

They passed through the wide city gate, where a wall of sound met them. The chanting, singing, rhythmic clapping, and various instruments were loudly audible even inside their wagon.

“Thorta’s populace seems to be expecting us,” Trker-Hon said.

“Best if we leave the wagon while it’s still moving,” Michalvona suggested. “Then we make sure we blend into the crowd as quickly as possible. Is that how we want to handle it?”

Her companions gave their agreement. Then the wagon jerked to a sudden stop. Steps approached and the door flew open.

“Tupan!” Michalovna cried. “What are you—”

Three other security guards stomped into the wagon behind the Ferron and took up position by the door, letting their weapons swing below their arms as if by accident.

“Before you say anything,” Tupan declared, “I’m here on the ringmaster’s orders. He wants to make sure you make really good use of the time until your big performance. Would you be kind enough to show us the current state of your routine?”

26.

Ivan Goratschin

In Scaramanca's Realm, Peru

Goratschin stood, keeping his rifle's barrel aimed at the mannequin.

"It's just a doll," said Colas.

"Far more than that," said Wuriu. "It has tech inside it. I see an energy cell and..." He shook his head. "I've never seen anything like it before. It's gleaming."

"Then let's see if it burns." Goratschin looked through the rifle's sights.

"Tsk, tsk!" came a sudden voice. "Is that how you do things? Breaking in somewhere and destroying whatever gets in your way?"

A man stepped out of the darkness—tall, with a noble-looking face that had high cheekbones and aqua eyes. He put one foot in front of the other, appearing to enjoy his grand debut. "Is that how representatives of the much-praised and much-cursed Terran Union think?"

In slow motion, Goratschin turned his head, making eye contact with Betty Toufry, John Marshall, and Anne Sloane in turn. They'd practiced a signal system that let them communicate with each other without having to talk. A task that the telepathically gifted Marshall and Toufry primarily helped with, of course.

All three briefly pressed their lips together, meaning "no." His question had consisted solely of "Mutant deployment?"—a quick arching of his right eyebrow.

The trio had said no, indicating that they couldn't detect the stranger with their powers. This meant they were being deceived by an astonishingly lifelike hologram.

“I know you’re not really standing there in front of us. Why don’t we give up on this weird variety show and talk face to face, Mr.…?”

The black-clad man gave a curt bow. “Scaramanca is my name.”

“The movie character?” Marshall asked.

For a moment, the man looked confused. “What?”

“Wasn’t there a movie character called that?”

Scaramanca’s projection shook its head. “I don’t know and I don’t care.”

“I’m—”

“John Marshall. I know,” Scaramanca said. “John Marshall, with his little mutant posse. Which one of you can walk along the ceiling and swing from skyscraper to skyscraper on long spiderwebs?

Marshall pointed to Sid and the Fantan lying on top of the Fantan ship behind the defensive shield. “We came to pick up our friend and the alien. I know you put up this shield. I want you to disable it right now so we can examine them both!”

The man shook his head. “I’m afraid you’re not in a position to give orders or make demands. I ask you to put down your weapons and stand in front of the shield!”

“And why should we agree to your demands?”

“Well, just see what I can do!” Scaramanca gestured towards the two motionless bodies. The energy shield flickered and twitched slightly. Then it drew inwards. More and more by the moment. Just before Sid’s head, it stopped. “You see? If you don’t do what I want, the boy won’t live much longer!”

“What do you really want? And under whose orders are you working?”

“No one gives me any orders. *I* decide. *I* dictate.”

“And I ask you to please open the shield so we can examine the boy.”

“Do you take me for a fool?” Scaramanca asked, indignant. “As soon as the shield is down, Mr. Kakuta will jump to the surface with him.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about us.”

“Virtually everything.”

“Sure you’re not exaggerating a little?”

Goratschin watched the duel between the two men, taken aback. Where did Marshall get all this confidence? Given his weaker position and Sid’s perilous situation, he was taking the offensive to a surprising degree.

“Information!” Scaramanca said loudly. “More than ever before, knowledge is power. Information is pure gold. Whoever possesses it automatically puts themselves in a good starting position. That’s why I have hundreds of eyes and ears in Terrania. It’s costly, I’ll admit, but standing in front of you now and knowing virtually everything about you is simply priceless.”

Marshall looked confused. “If that’s true and you really managed to set up a spy network in Terrania…couldn’t you have spared yourself the danger of kidnapping a Fantan? If you want a transfer of technology, you’d get the information through your super spiffing info network. Am I wrong?”

“You’re not listening to me, Mr. Marshall. I said ‘virtually everything.’ Not ‘absolutely everything.’ Unfortunately, my eyes and ears met with doors that were closed to them. I know about the subterranean experimental labs and high-tech workshops, which have developed wondrous things in an unbelievably short space of time…even if you could have gotten much further if you had cleverer minds there and not just a few idiots whose greatest achievement is hanging a diploma on the wall. Do you know why Rhodan’s utopia won’t become a reality? Because you rely on bores instead of geniuses. It’s true for Adams, it’s true for Rhodan, and it’s

also true for you with your freak show, Mr. Marshall."

Marshall narrowed his eyes and cocked his head as if trying to remember. "This is all ringing a bell. Could it be that I've already heard of you?"

"I..." Scaramanca drew a breath, then continued in a disparaging tone, "I stood at Terrania's gates. I wanted to help Rhodan. But you didn't want me. I wasn't wanted. I was turned away."

"I remember an applicant who boasted some unusual credentials. But Reginald Bull sent him away because he'd murdered nine people. Not some strangers, but family members and friends. He'd been convicted but had broken out of a psychiatric institute and was seeking asylum in Terrania. I can't quite remember his name anymore, Mr...."

"Scaramanca! That's my name, you pig-ignorant fool! I didn't kill anybody. All the people you're speaking of are still alive!"

Marshall in no way rose to the tall stranger's angry outburst. "What do you want?" he asked again.

Scaramanca breathed heavily, evidently requiring some effort to regain his composure. Goratschin glanced at Wuriu. He seemed to be under a lot of stress. His eyelids were flickering incessantly. Every so often, his lips moved without saying anything.

Goratschin counted along with him. In his head, a three-dimensional grid formed. "X, Y, Z."

Wuriu repeated his utterance twice. Kakuta, too, stole a glance at him, counting along with Goratschin. Slowly, Goratschin raised a hand and rested it on the teleporter's thin shoulder.

"I want access to the Arkonide knowledge!" Scaramanca said. "You're going to give it to me!"

Betty Toufry let out a shocked scream. She pointed at the energy shield, which drew in on itself again.

"Walk over to the shield or they'll both die."

“I know what you’re planning. As soon as we’re standing together, you’ll switch off the shield for a fraction of a second and then activate it again, but bigger, so it surrounds us all.”

“You don’t have to tell me what I already know. As soon as I have you, Adams will be forced to agree to my demands.”

Goratschin squeezed Tako’s shoulder twice. He felt a brief tugging in his head and stomach, then they were already standing in the location Wuriu had indicated after seeing it with his gift. If they hadn’t made a mistake or miscounted. Like the previous room, this one was almost entirely dark. Single thin beams of light illuminated storefront mannequins. More than half a dozen stood around them. Goratschin was looking at eight artificial faces. Their painted-on eyes gazed into emptiness.

“Are… Are we in the right place?” Kakuta asked. “This looks more like a junk room that—”

“Listen, listen,” said a frail woman's voice. *“We have visitors, but undesired ones.”*

“Isn’t it too early to judge that?” answered another voice whose gender Goratschin couldn’t determine. *“We haven’t seen anything of their minds yet.”*

“It’s the mind that builds the body,” said a third voice.

“A quotation? Do you know this one? ‘He who has accumulated virtue will certainly also possess eloquence; but he who has eloquence does not necessarily possess virtue.’”

“Twain?” asked the first voice.

“Confucius,” said the second.

More voices joined them, confused and mixed up.

Kakuta spun around in a circle. “What… What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m not sure,” Goratschin replied. “But I think we’re in the right

place."

"We should..." Kakuta stopped short and looked down. "I... I can't move my legs anymore. Not at all. My arms or my legs. It's like I've been put in a block of cement."

"Someone's affecting the suit's exoskeleton," Goratschin said. He himself hadn't warmed to the technological advancements. In contrast to the mutants, he was wearing a durable uniform from the Chinese army's stocks and light chest armor made of aramid fibers.

A deep laugh resounded amid the clamor of voices. Goratschin looked over the dolls' heads. A door had opened at the back of the room, and the man they'd seen the projection of stepped forward.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting!" Scaramanca called to them. "But I was busy rounding up your friends to put them under the same defensive shield." Calmly, he walked over to them. "It's so easy to catch a teleporter. Fascinating gift, this jumping around."

He grabbed one of the mannequins by the waist and left arm and danced two pirouettes with it. Carefully, he placed it on the floor again before stepping over to Goratschin and Kakuta.

"I've often wondered if the goings-on in here"—he tapped on Kakuta's forehead twice with his index finger—"could be copied using technology. Imagine: vehicles would become redundant because everyone could just feed coordinates into their *teleporter* and hey, presto, you'd be where you wanted to be."

Goratschin saw Kakuta's face turn red. Then he was suddenly gone. Only the empty suit was still there.

Now Goratschin was standing alone in front of Scaramanca. Around him were the mannequins and their tangle of voices. He tried to tune them out as much as possible. Nonetheless, isolated fragments reached him.

"...the gift of corporeal life..."

"...only confrontation brings change..."

Scaramanca raised a hand. Instantly, Goratschin felt the weapon in his hand growing heavier. With uncanny force, it was yanked to the floor.

“Do you have telekinesis?” Goratschin gasped.

Scaramanca smiled. “Oh, no. My mind does indeed make me into something special. But ultimately, my gift is technology.”

A single man entered the room, a Latino with long, straight hair, a weapon at the ready. “Hola, gringo!” he said.

Goratschin shook his head. The unseen speakers’ voices grew in intensity, raining down on him like blows from a fist.

The man approached him, the weapon’s barrel aimed directly at his throat. Goratschin watched the man’s face.

“Jefe?” the armed man asked.

“Shoot him, Paco!” Scaramanca replied. “He’s worthless to us.”

Scaramanca looked at Goratschin contemplatively. “How tragic for someone to trade away their gift like a cyst that needs cutting out. I expect you’d be glad now to still have it.”

Paco raised the weapon’s barrel and aimed directly between Goratschin’s eyes. Goratschin looked the man in the face. He knew the expression on it all too well. A murderer against his will. But a murderer nonetheless.

Tears welled in Goratschin’s eyes. *Zanawar!* said the voices of the past in his mind. *Zanawar!* Again and again: *Zanawar!*

In his mind’s eye, he saw bearded heads exploding. The awful images gushing up to the fountain’s surface. The heads transformed into the face of Paco, who was standing before him. And at that moment, Goratschin knew that he’d rather die than see one more head vanish in a geyser of blood. He looked at the man’s finger. He saw him pulling the trigger.

Zanawar, he thought.

Then the finger vanished with a glaring flash. The man's arm was flung back by the explosion's force, his body following, as if an invisible rope was yanking him away with full force.

Paco screamed, and the others' voices rose to a crescendo, melding into a cacophony of words and sounds.

A sob escaped from Goratschin's throat. Through the blur of tears, he saw his true opponent.

Scaramanca looked at him with aqua eyes. His face remained fixed, as if he'd processed the horror that had just occurred within a split-second.

Goratschin's knees gave out. He sank to the floor.

"What a fine demonstration of the human spirit," Scaramanca said, half admiring and half mocking. "I'm serious. Until now, I thought human evolution would be defined by science—by technical development. But you are your friends. They prove that humans truly stand on the threshold of a new era."

"Let... Let them go! They have no—"

"No what? No chance?" Scaramanca looked at him like a kindly father might when his son claimed to want to conquer the world. "I read faces like others read books. The way you move, how you hold your rifle, tells me that you're not green when it comes to battles of man versus man. You could come from the police or an anti-terror unit, but they go home to their families after a shift. You're not one of those types. When you're on a mission, you know that it's either you or them. Only a soldier who's served in war plays the card of their own life just as readily as they would an ace or a joker. No, you're a soldier. One who didn't only fight and suffer shoulder to shoulder with his comrades. One who's different from the others. Who's armed with superhuman abilities. Who killed because he could. Who was feared as much by his friends as his enemies."

Goratschin opened his mouth, about to say something, but nothing happened. With growing desperation, he pulled at his

weapon, but it wouldn't budge a millimeter.

Scaramanca shook his head. "We humans already know many secrets of life. The world, universe, waves. Sound waves, gravity. Magnetism. Believe me, you wouldn't be able to aim that weapon at me even if you were ten times stronger than you are."

"Give up," he managed to utter, "or I'll destroy you. Cell by cell if I have to."

"Tsk, tsk," Scaramanca replied. "What a sad bluff. I saw exactly what happened with you when you were on the verge of killing my colleague. You'd already grabbed the doorknob; one little push and the forbidden door would have opened. But you wavered. You couldn't do it."

Goratschin pressed his lips together because they were trembling too much.

"You're tired of killing, aren't you? You're sick of being feared even by your closest friends. Tell me: what did they call you back then, when you had that blood frenzy in you? I'm sure they gave you a name!"

Tears ran down Goratschin's cheeks.

"I have nothing against you. Quite the contrary. I have the greatest respect for your inner struggle. For your humility in the face of your omnipotence. Go back to your friends. I won't do anything to you or the others. All I want is the knowledge Perry Rhodan obtained. That he supposedly won for all humanity."

Goratschin let go of the weapon. It fell to the floor with a dull clatter.

"You see a lot," he murmured as he stood up. "I don't know if you really got all that from observing me or if those eyes and ears in Terrania you mentioned can take the credit. It's true. If there's one image I can't see ever again, it's an exploding head. The thoughts of an entire life being vaporized in a split-second. I can't even destroy the end of a finger without being absolutely certain

that I'll regret the act for the rest of my days."

He gestured towards Paco, who was lying on the ground, his injured hand pressed tightly to his chest as he groaned softly.

"I know all this now," Goratschin continued. "I've learned it all. But you're wrong about one point. One you didn't bring up."

Scaramanca raised an eyebrow. "Namely?"

"I can't read faces as accurately as you can. When I look at you, I don't see a thousand things. I only see one: arrogance. You think you're superior to me. You take me for a simpleton driven by base instincts. You overlook that war is an excellent teacher. Even when the soul breaks, the mind keeps learning."

Scaramanca twisted his face into an insipid smirk. "What are you trying to say? That you can write better poetry than I can?"

"No," Goratschin replied. "That I can add two and two together. Or should I say two and eight?"

Scaramanca's face became a stone mask. Not a single muscle twitched. "You wouldn't dare," he said. "That would be murder just as surely as if you killed me or one of my men."

"That's for future generations to decide. I'm of a different opinion."

One of the mannequins vanished amid a deafening explosion. The other voices screamed in panic. The acrid stench of burned plastic filled the room.

Goratschin fixed his gaze on Scaramanca. His face was torn open into a scream.

"As a soldier, it's important to always keep your eyes and ears open. There's a reason they say you should know your enemy better than you know yourself. You killed nine family members and friends, but claim they still live. Nine lives. Nine dolls. Nine voices in the night."

Scaramanca raised both hands. “Please stop, I beg you! They didn’t do anything to you!”

“Family and friends who live on as data? I’m sorry, but for me that’s not life worth protecting.”

Another doll exploded. The smoke felt like sandpaper in Goratschin’s eyes, making tears well up again.

“Stop!” Scaramanca screamed like a man possessed. “I surrender! I’ll do what you want, just leave them be! Please!”

“Let the others go,” Goratschin demanded.

Scaramanca rubbed his face. His body was twitching and pulsating.

“Let them go or it’s the next doll’s turn,” Goratschin said calmly. “Who will it be? A brother? A friend who trusted you?”

“You’re... You’re a monster!”

“Not a monster. An animal,” Goratschin said softly. “The others, the Taliban, they called me an animal. ‘Zanawar.’ That was what you wanted to know, right?”

“Leave them alone. Please.”

“Let the others go.”

Goratschin could see the man’s mind working. In less than a minute, the situation had changed completely. Scaramanca’s shoulders sank. His inner resistance had broken. He reached and pressed a point on his wrist.

“I switched off the shield,” Scaramanca said. “Your friends are free.”

“They’re not my friends,” Goratschin replied. “And they never will be.”

Tako Kakuta and John Marshall appeared next to him out of

nowhere, and he watched as Scaramanca allowed himself to be handcuffed without resistance.

27.

Crest

In the Past

Thorta, Ferrol

You have to get out of here! At all costs!

Crest da Zoltral gave no reply. The Arkonide and his companions were waiting behind the improvised stage. The room was a vault with walls made of irregular stone and rough mortar. It should have been cool and wet, but instead, the heat was barely tolerable.

It was coming from the dozens of performers and acrobats crammed in there, waiting to perform for the newly crowned Thort. The Ferrons, who had no sweat glands, were loudly panting to cool themselves, their tongues sticking out.

You have to get out of here! his extra sense repeated. *Think of the consequences! We know from the lore that the Arkonide called Kerlon was among the coronation ceremony's guests. He'll recognize one of his own in an instant!*

He would. And even if he inexplicably didn't, he'd recognize Michalovna as a human and Trker-Hon as a sentient alien—and neither a human nor an intelligent lizard had any reason to be on Ferrol.

Crest didn't know much about Kerlon, but even the biggest idiot alive would have immediately known something was afoot. Then Kerlon wouldn't leave the system tonight. He wouldn't take a transmitter to Earth and give it to his commander. He wouldn't later set up the Bastion on a moon orbiting Lannol. Perry Rhodan, in the present, would find neither the aged, mentally addled Kerlon on Lannol nor the *Tosoma* auxiliary craft. That would make it impossible for Rhodan to present himself to the Topsidans as the Ferrons' legendary Lightbringer. The Topsidans' invasion would end

in a bloodbath for the Ferrons instead of a negotiated peace forced by Rhodan.

And you, Crest da Zoltral, won't discover a transmitter in the underwater dome on the bed of the Atlantic, and won't be able set out searching for the Planet of Eternal Life! added the Arkonide's reawakened extra sense.

A hand grasped him firmly on the upper arm. "Crest, are you okay? You're shaking!" Michalovna looked at him with her expressive eyes.

"Yes... Yes, I'm all right again. Just a moment of faintness. I... The possibilities..." He stopped. He couldn't find the words to express the potential consequences of a time paradox.

"You don't need to explain." She squeezed more tightly. "I understand."

"Thanks!" Crest meant it. Over the past few days, he'd developed a great deal of trust in the telepath. He knew that she wasn't reading his thoughts. As a side effect of her gift, she seemed to have a heightened sense of empathy.

Don't hesitate! demanded the voice in his mind. *You can still act!*

How often he had wished to finally hear his extra sense again after it had gone silent on Earth for reasons unknown. Now it had come back to life just as inexplicably. He should have been happy, but Crest found himself wishing he could be rid of it again. His extra sense was a traveling companion that, in theory, never left his side, but was all too often unpleasant company, a tormenter who nagged him relentlessly, fed from his own inner being.

Crest looked around. Michalovna was standing there, her eyes closed. She was concentrating on the Ferrons' thoughts. Trker-Hon was on all fours, playing the animal again. No one looked to be taking any notice of them. But looks could be deceiving. A warning bell had apparently gone off in the ringmaster's mind even before they'd reached Ferron. Otherwise, he'd never have put them under guard.

Suddenly, the sound of automatic weapon fire thundered from the stage.

Crest gave a start. He was about to throw himself to the floor before realizing at the last second that it wasn't a battle breaking out. The gunfire was part of an act. A group of stout Ferrons were dancing—a grotesque performance. They were cripples. The men and women were hobbling across the stage with an awkwardness that set off both boundless pity and boundless admiration in Crest. Again and again they aimed at each other, only barely missing their fellow performers.

The Ferrons were looking back on a century of war. Now that they were celebrating the end of the Dark Age, they were doing it in the manner they were used to.

The consequences of a time paradox are immeasurable, whispered his extra sense. *Flee, even if you have no hope! Your death would be a small price to pay!*

Crest remained firm. *Seeing our corpses would be enough to keep Kerlon from leaving tonight!*

The cripples' dance ended in a booming hail of bullets as they all shot their magazines empty at once.

Crest and his companions moved forward. Three more acts and it would be their turn.

A young woman took the stage and sang a song for her beloved, who had been left behind in battle. While she sang, she cut her forearms with a knife. It would take a long time for the wounds in the Ferrons' souls to heal.

Crest had a clearer view of the auditorium now. The hall of the old castle, around which the Thort was having a palace built that would later be known as the Red Palace in the megalopolis of Thorta, reminded Crest of a medieval church he'd visited on Earth. High windows let in Vega's rapidly dwindling light. Many of the frescoes on the walls were covered with large flat-panel displays silently showing recordings of various warlords surrendering to the

Thort.

The videos never showed the Thort's face. No one knew what he looked like.

Under normal circumstances, Crest would have been itching to meet the man who had managed to break the cycle of violence after a century of war. Right now, though, the newly crowned Thort felt secondary to him. All of Crest's attention was on a handful of Arkonides. They were wearing uniforms of the Grand Imperium's fleet. Young people, but with a seriousness about them that reminded Crest of the Ferrons. This era's Arkonides were at war too. The Methanes threatened to overrun the Imperium.

Between the other Arkonides sat a young man with sad eyes. That had to be Kerlon, the *Tosoma* auxiliary craft commander who had led a reconnaissance mission into the Vega system. The tragedies of war had allowed Kerlon no rest. Against his orders, he'd intervened in the Ferrons' struggles on the side of the Thort.

This was the very Kerlon who would bring a transmitter to Earth. The very Kerlon who could not catch sight of them under any circumstances. The very Kerlon who would do just that in a few minutes—unless a miracle occurred.

The young woman's sad song ended. She staggered off the stage leaving a trail of blood that no one appeared to be doing anything about. Assistants helped her when she reached the door through which the performers existed.

A new act came on. Ferrons with garishly painted faces and lurid, vastly oversized clothes. They reminded Crest of Earth's clowns.

"What's Kerlon thinking about?" he asked the telepath.

"I can't say." Sweat beaded on Michalovna's forehead. "Thousands of Ferrons' thoughts are coming at me at once. They're all excited."

"You can't pick out his thoughts?"

“Not yet.” She shook her head. “But I can tell you the Arkonide in the middle of the group is Kerlon.”

Crest didn’t press her further. The telepath was doing everything she could. He watched the clown routine. The initially harmless horseplay had taken on a different quality. The clowns appeared to be taking each other’s limbs off, with fake blood spurting across the stage.

Don’t judge them! his extra sense whispered. *Often, the only way to rise above the cruelty of existence is to make a mockery of it.*

The audience loved this routine. The clowns left the stage amid thunderous applause.

Acrobats took their place. They brought trampolines on stage and used them to perform breathtaking maneuvers. The muscular Ferrons soared so high that they touched the ceiling, which Crest guessed was at least thirty meters above them.

“Kerlon!” Michalovna whispered. “I have him! He’s… He’s uneasy.”

“How so? Did he see us?” Crest involuntarily took a step back. Only a curtain shielded them from being seen from the auditorium.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Then what is it? Kerlon has no reason for unease. He’s being honored too. The Ferrons see him and his people as demigods.”

“It’s… I…” The telepath’s eyes rolled back.

The acrobats’ performance ended with a collective jump to the ceiling. Now it was their turn. They had to step into the limelight right in front of Kerlon and his subordinates.

Dizziness seized Crest. His perception grew blurry and the world seemed to be spinning around him. Had the time paradox already kicked in? Had the whirlpool of time taken him?

Pull yourself together! his extra sense demanded. *It’s too late. Look*

Kerlon in the eye! Speak with him! He'll likely take you with him to Earth. Then he'll bring you to his commander!

The commander. Only now did Crest realize that they had to throw themselves into Kerlon's arms rather than fleeing from him. Kerlon's commander was the man who had written the scroll the elderly Arkonide was carrying with him. The immortal one! He...

Crest sensed a hard grip on his arm again. As if through a haze, he heard Michalovna saying, "We have nothing to fear! Come on!"

She pulled him with her. Crest wanted to resist, but he was too weak. His head lowered, he stumbled onto the stage.

"Crest!" the telepath whispered. "Everything's fine! Just look!"

The Arkonide pulled himself together. Kerlon would recognize him as an Arkonide regardless of whether he hung his head or not. Why not look his fate in the eye? He glanced up...and saw that they were saved.

Kerlon and the other Arkonides had left their seats. They were leaving the coronation ceremony early. With quick steps, they were hurrying to the closest exit, without a single look back at the stage.

A moment later, they'd left the hall.

Crest couldn't believe his eyes. The time paradox had been averted! Through an unbelievable coincidence. Or *was* it a coincidence? Perhaps it had been predetermined that they—

"You three!" came a loud voice, interrupting his thoughts. "Why are you standing around looking lost?"

It was the Thort. He had stood up. He was an unusually lanky, wiry Ferron. His body was covered in scars. And his face... He had three eyes. Two like those of all other Ferrons, and a third, larger eye embedded in his forehead.

The all-seeing one! Crest's extra sense whispered. *So that's why they call him that!*

“Go on!” the Thort shouted. “Show us your performance piece!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Crest saw movement. With a gesture, Trker-Hon shook off the mask of an animal and said loudly and clearly, “It’s an honor to be able to entertain you, Thort!”

Unrest arose in the audience. Ferrons had mastered space travel within their own system. So far, they’d never encountered any non-humanoid sentient life-forms. Trker-Hon had to seem impossible to them.

“We bow before the man who brought freedom to the Ferrons,” the Topsidan continued. He lowered his upper body. Crest gave Michalovna a push when she made no indication of stirring. The telepath gave a slight shake of the head. She couldn’t read the Thort’s mind.

The Thort observed them in silence. To Crest, it felt as though the Ferron’s third eye was seeing through him. As if all his innermost secrets were laid bare.

“A lizard who babbles some inconsequential sentences it doesn’t even understand!” The Thort clicked his tongue in disdain. “Is that all you have to offer?” He waved over a small group of soldiers. “Away with you! You are boring me!”

Without resisting, Crest and his companions let themselves be led out of the hall. The Arkonide trembled. His relief was endless.

Outside, night had fallen. On the plain in front of the city that would later become the capital for all Ferrons, light shimmered.

They showed the position of the circus. To Crest, they looked like the enticing lights of home. In half an hour, they’d be there, considering what their next move should be. The time paradox seemed to be averted. Everything else would work itself out.

The soldiers led them deeper into the castle.

“What’s going on?” Crest asked. “What do you want with us?”

The soldiers came to a stop in front of a rough stone archway

leading into the vaults under the castle. Steps disappeared down into the darkness.

“That’s for the Thort to decide,” the leader replied before giving Crest a shove.

28.

Sid González

Valle del Colca, Peru

Sid had to sit down. The torments of the last few days had sapped him completely. It was only half an hour since he'd woken up from the drug the criminals had given him.

The relief he'd felt upon seeing Marshall and the others had been enormous. And when he found out that in the end, it had been Ivan Goratschin who had forced Scaramanca to his knees and freed them all, he'd felt only two emotions: relief...and shame.

Marshall and Goratschin were standing next to him. The three of them watched as a police unit from Arequipa took Scaramanca's men away. The one with the injured hand was treated by a doctor before he too was loaded in and transported.

"Do they believe us about Scaramanca escaping?" Sid asked.

Marshall made an indeterminate gesture. "I sense their doubt. But they won't go far enough to search our copter. We have official permission from the government. It gives us a kind of diplomatic immunity."

Sid ran a hand down his face. He was sweating heavily. "What... What about Kerbir?"

Marshall frowned. "Who's that?"

"The Fantan," Sid explained as he pulled up a dry stalk of grass. "He woke up briefly. Strangely, he addressed me as 'Besun.' He gave me his name and tried to tell me something, but he passed out before I could get what it was."

"I'm sorry, Sid," Marshall said. "But Kerbir was already dead when we found you. There was nothing more we could have done for him. I truly wish your solo venture had been successful. We'll

take him back to Terrania anyway. We'll preserve his body there and give him to the Fantan if our paths cross again. I'm sorry."

Sid pursed his lips. He'd suspected as much but had only just had the courage to ask.

"What happens now?" Goratschin asked.

"We'll wait until the underground base is secured, then fly back to Terrania. Later, several teams will come here and take everything to examine it."

"Time to go our separate ways, then."

Sid looked at the giant, stunned. Then he stood up. Faintness came over him, but before he lost his balance, Goratschin's hands held him steady.

"You should lie down, Sid," Goratschin said.

Sid shook his head. "Not before I say what I have to say."

The corners of Goratschin's mouth twisted into a bitter smile. "You don't have to say anything, Sid. It's all okay."

"It's not," he insisted. "I'm sorry for what I said to you in Terrania. You're not a monster. You're...like me. Exactly like me. It was wrong of me not to distinguish between you and your brother. I'm... I'm really sorry." He stared at the tall man, almost pleading.

"You made some good points. Your words even helped me make an important decision." Goratschin looked at Marshall. "Now something's happened that I have to work through on my own. Maybe I'll manage to make peace with my gift after all."

"That's something I don't understand," Marshall said. "I thought the operation was a success."

Goratschin smiled again. Sadness remained in his eyes, however. "It was just the first operation of many. And the human brain is...very complex. Evidently, it doesn't want me to destroy its facilities so easily."

He reached out his hand and Marshall shook it. Then he leaned down to Sid and briefly pressed a hand against his broad chest.

“Goodbye,” Goratchin said, then turned and went down the hillside.

Sid watched him go, open-mouthed, until the giant had disappeared into the oncoming evening fog.

“Did... Did I say something wrong?” he asked.

“No,” John replied. “Quite the opposite. But he has to go his own way.”

“Will we ever see him again?”

“Who knows? He’s an extraordinary person. And extraordinary people will hopefully always find their way back to Terrania.”

Sid mused over that for a moment. “And what do we do with Scaramanca?”

Marshall turned his head and looked at the supercopter, pondering. “He seems like an extraordinary person too, albeit in a very different sense. I don’t know what Adams’ll want to do with him.”

“He’s dangerous.”

“And he looks to be a technical whiz.” Marshall took a brief pause before adding, “Scaramanca’s a pseudonym, by the way. His real name is Allister T. Whistler.”

29.

Tatiana Michalovna

In the Past

Thorta, Ferrol

It was wet and cold in the vault under the castle. It stank of old urine; the compacted clay soil underfoot gleamed wetly. A single lamp offered dim light. It was electric, which looked like an anachronism. A wooden torch would have better suited the surroundings.

Michalovna couldn't help thinking about a suitor she'd once had in Russia. "They'll burn you at the stake!" he'd said, fearful when he had realized that dangerous gifts slumbered in the slim beauty.

"They won't do anything to us," Crest whispered.

"Of course not," the Wise One agreed. The Topsidan had put the eyepatch over his empty socket again. "We didn't commit any crime. It must be a mistake."

The telepath refrained from sharing what she had read in the guards' thoughts. The Thort had brought freedom to the Ferrons, not through negotiation but with an iron fist. In this time and place, one life had negligible value at most. The guards harbored no doubt as to what fate awaited the captives. They were only surprised that they hadn't yet been given the order to kill.

Silently, Michalovna cursed her telepathic ability. At first, it had seemed like a gift. It would no doubt make her life immeasurably easier, right? But that conclusion had proven false a long time ago now. What did knowledge bring? It was overrated, Michalovna had been forced to learn. Knowledge only rarely helped. But there was one thing it did without fail: it dulled the joy of life.

Knowing too much quickly shattered your illusions. And what

was life without comforting illusions?

The hours dragged on. At some point, Crest and Trker-Hon fell silent. The Topsidan's reserves were virtually inexhaustible; he was ready and willing to spend hour after hour splitting hairs about the whys and wherefores of a question. But Crest was old and sick. His strength was deserting him.

The Arkonide had been crouching against the wall to avoid touching the wet floor. He didn't manage it for long. He collapsed onto his knees before finally lying on the ground, his teeth chattering.

Michalovna took off her jacket and walked over to the old man. "Here!" She held out her jacket to him. "To warm you up a little."

He looked at her, then the jacket. "You're too good to me, Tatiana. But I can't accept that. You need your jacket yourself."

"No." She forced her lips into a grimace that was intended to look dauntless. "It'll be fine. I'll think warm thoughts." She was alluding to her para-gift. When she activated it, it took energy, which made her sweat. But by now, the telepath was drained and on the verge of shivering from the cold herself.

Crest hesitated a moment, then sat up and wrapped the jacket around himself. "Thanks, Tatiana!"

"No worries. You'd have done the same in my—"

She stopped when she picked up unease in the guards' thoughts. A moment later, the heavy shackle securing the dungeon's steel door was pulled back.

A man entered. In his right hand, he held a weapon at the ready. In the middle of his forehead, an eye gleamed. The Thort.

The door closed behind the ruler of all Ferrons. He came to a stop three steps away from the prisoners. Crest jumped up and would have stumbled if Michalovna and Trker-Hon hadn't supported him.

“Who are you?” the Thort asked. “And I’m warning you: tell me the truth!”

Michalovna felt like the three-eyed man’s gaze was piercing through her. She focused. She grew warm, and quickly hot, as she activated the last dregs of her gift. It was in vain. The Thort’s mind remained hidden to her even though he was standing right there.

She tried to interpret his gaze and read grim determination in his third eye. And anguish. An anguish that was familiar to her. The Thort, she realized, was like her: he’d experienced too much to put any stock in illusions.

“Speak!” he ordered.

Michalovna gave herself a shake. What did they have to lose? “I’m Tatiana Michalovna. I’m a human. This is Crest da Zoltral, an Arkonide. Trker-Hon is a Topsidan.” She fell silent for a second, then cleared her throat and added, “We come from another solar system. And the future.”

To her surprise, the Thort was not surprised. Impassive, as if she’d told him she came from a neighboring town, he asked, “What brings you to my time?”

For a second, she felt her own confusion. “A hope for life. Crest is terminally ill. On Earth, my homeworld, it’s impossible to heal him. That’s why we set out to find a cure for him elsewhere.” Michalovna decided not to tell the Thort about the Planet of Eternal Life. She feared that it would stretch his willingness to believe them to breaking point.

“And so you came to Ferrol?” He seemed baffled by her last statement.

“We didn’t know where the transmitter would send us. We were desperate, so we rested all our hopes on the idea that whoever made the miraculous transmitters could surely also work medical miracles.”

“You came through a transmitter?” The pupils of his three eyes

narrowed.

“Yes. But it was destroyed.”

“That is regrettable.” The Thort took this as such a matter of course that Michalovna had no doubt he was familiar with the devices. To him, this matter seemed only logical to him. His distant successor, the present-day Thort, still used the Vega system’s transmitter network to bolster his rule.

The Thort lowered his weapon a little, but didn’t secure it. “Why were you so reluctant during the coronation ceremony?”

“Because the fate of the future was at stake,” Michalovna replied. “Kerlon would have instantly recognized us as non-Ferrons. According to the historical records, you, Thort, gave Kerlon a transmitter tonight as thanks for his service. Kerlon left Ferrol with the transmitter this same night. But…” She paused to allow the words to make a suitable impact on the Thort. “What would happen if Kerlon caught sight of us? He surely wouldn’t have just flown away. Maybe he wouldn’t have left at all and wouldn’t have returned to Earth. There’d have been no transmitter for us to use when setting out on our search. We’d have changed the course of history, with unimaginable consequences!”

“I understand.” The Thort raised his weapon to secure it, then holstered it. “And Perry Rhodan wouldn’t have set out to save you.”

“Wh… What?” Michalovna’s heart skipped a beat. She felt faint.

“How do you know about Perry Rhodan?” Crest exclaimed. Tears streamed down his cheek, a sign of heightened emotions in an Arkonide.

“I met him years ago,” the Thort replied. He balled his hand. “I wasn’t born as the Thort, you know. I was a cripple—one soldier among many thousands who served Nerlan the Ugly and ravaged the neighboring planet of Rofus. I was cannon fodder with a life expectancy counted in months.” The Thort’s gaze was distant all of a sudden, as if his mind had traveled back in time. “Then I met Perry Rhodan and his companions. They had traveled through time

and space using a transmitter just like you."

"Companions?" Crest asked. His voice trembled. "Was a woman among them?"

"Yes. Two, in fact. One was young, the other still a child. The young woman resembled you, Crest."

"Thora! It must have been Thora!"

"I believe that was her name. The child who wasn't really a child was called Sue. Sue had a special gift. Like you, Tatiana Michalovna." The Thort's gaze came back to the present and fixed on the telepath. "Like you, yet different. Sue awakened my third eye. She made me all-seeing. Rhodan and a wise Ferron called Lossoshér informed me of the Thort who would end the Ferron Dark Age, and even about the transmitters. They gave my life meaning. Made me omnipresent."

A knot formed in Michalovna's stomach and contracted painfully. Perry Rhodan and Sue Mirafiore had made this man into the Thort. Their friends had done exactly what they'd just luckily avoided doing: create a time paradox. Only through their intervention did the first Thort exist. But only because a reigning Thort existed in the present, ten thousand years later, did they encounter the transmitters at all—and if not for that, they'd never have traveled back in time to meet the first Thort...

Next to her, Crest groaned. "That...wasn't what I hoped for. Rhodan and Thora and the others went through the transmitter to save me—and now they're in danger themselves!"

"You have no reason to blame yourself," the Thort insisted. "Every being is responsible for their own decisions. You didn't ask Rhodan to follow you."

"No! But I should have..." The sentence gave away to sobbing.

"What happened to Rhodan and his companions, Thort?" Michalovna asked. "You said you met them years ago on the neighboring planet of Rofus. Where are they now?"

“I don’t know, even though I’m called all-seeing. They went through a transmitter to an unknown place. I’m sorry I can’t tell you any more.” The Thort blinked. “I always hoped to meet Rhodan, Sue, or one of his other companions again. It never happened. Sadly. But I’m honored to be able to meet his friends.” He lowered his upper body, bowing in a gesture that resembled the one Michalovna, Crest, and Trker-Hon had used to show him respect in the coronation room a few hours earlier. “Come! You still haven’t reached the end of your search.”

The door opened in front of the Thort as if the guards had been eavesdropping and waiting for this moment. With lowered heads, they let their ruler and the former prisoners pass by.

The Thort led them through an array of vaults. “These come from our early history,” he explained. “Even then, we Ferrons waged countless wars. The local rulers built ever bigger and more complex strongholds to survive.”

After a few minutes, he stopped in front of a door that resembled the one leading to their cell and prized it open. In the room beyond stood a transmitter.

“I thought you gave the transmitter under the Red Palace to Kerlon!” Crest said, stunned.

“I did. And you needn’t worry. By now, Kerlon has left in his spacecraft. There will be no time paradox—at least, not the one you feared.” The Thort stepped over to the control panel. “But as you see, it’s not the only device of its kind.”

Bright light shot out of the transmitter’s two columns and met in the middle, forming a glowing archway. Below it, an impenetrable blackness appeared. The transmitter was ready.

The Thort turned around. “The device is at your disposal. Where do you want to go?”

Michalovna looked questioningly at Crest. The Arkonide slowly nodded. Trker-Hon hissed.

“To our present,” the telepath replied.

“I’m afraid I must disappoint you. I’m not able to fulfill your wish. Lossoshér, the transmitter guardian, showed me how to use the transmitters. In the years since then, I’ve learned even more. But how to program in a journey through time is unknown to me.”

The Thort quickly ran his fingers across the console, browsing through the options. “I see a receiving station that wasn’t available until now. It appears to lie outside the Vega system. Do you want to try your luck there on your search for immortality?”

Michalovna felt like she’d been given an electric shock. “How do you know what we’re looking for? We didn’t say anything about that! Did Rhodan tell you about it?”

“No.” The Thort didn’t appear to be angry that they’d concealed their true goal. “But in this case, my ‘all-knowing’ descriptor has proven accurate.” He moved his hand up to the eye in his forehead. “What’s your decision?”

Again, the three travelers exchanged questioning glances.

“The path to the Planet of Eternal Life winds through a series of tests,” the Wise One remarked. “Or so we believe, anyway. I think one of them involves putting our courage and determination to the test.”

“You’re suggesting that…” Crest began.

“Yes. Only those who dare to throw themselves into the unknown can gain immortality. We must have the courage to brave this mysterious station. It can’t be a coincidence that it’s available for the first time at this exact moment.”

Crest stayed silent a moment. Tears welled in his eyes. “You’re right, Trker-Hon.” He turned to the telepath. “What do you think, Tatiana?”

Michalovna looked into the endless blackness that had opened up before them. It scared her. But anyone who let fear rule them might as well be dead.

“What are we waiting for?” she asked.

Epilogue

As he tramped alone through the undergrowth and sensed the rising cold that prickled his bare underarms and face, for the first time in ages, he felt truly free.

Ultimately, it didn't matter who held the dice in their hands. All it came down to was what you made out of the numbers that came up.

Ivan Goratschin looked up at the mountain range and watched as the sun sank behind it. One day was drawing to a close. Another would soon begin. He wondered if he'd ever see Ishy Matsu again. He wished for that like he had never hoped for anything in his life before.

Goratschin smiled.

Episode 20: The Floating City

By Hermann Ritter

1.

On the Hunt

Reyan, sometime

Telgar kept completely still. The harpoon was safely in his right hand. It was a part of him. He was connected to it, saw its target recognition, knew its range. He didn't feel its weight.

His right arm was strong, stronger than the arms of the other hunters. He had paid a lot in Kimmon to make his arm what it was now: perfect.

He breathed calmly. In and out. Always quietly and always in the same rhythm. His eyes did not perceive the beauty of the landscape. His gaze was only on the water.

Concentrating, he looked at the waves cresting before him. Small air bubbles showed him that the Shetla couldn't stay under water for much longer.

He was not allowed to be arrogant. At that moment, it was important to remember what could happen. *The Shetla is a dangerous beast. Many a fisherman have died because the first harpoon didn't incapacitate its target. The injured Shetla then thrashes around wildly in pain. Its three tails whip through the water until the fishing boat capsizes and sinks. Many people have sunk to their deaths in the raging, frothing water. Their friends and family can then only wait from a distance until the maimed Shetla has finished its dance of death. First they recover the dead animal, then they search for the fisherman's corpse.*

Such is life.

Such is death.

He winked and switched to the harpoon's targeting device. He could clearly see the surface of the sea. The air bubbles were rising

faster; a clear sign that the Shetla was approaching the surface.

Telgar hardly dared to breathe. A brown mass seemed to rise in the water.

A big animal, he thought. *He'll provide for the family for some weeks. And if the meat is recycled, I can sell its umbra to the mud creepers.*

The surface of the water broke as the giant animal's back rose for it to take in air. Then the Shetla would sink down again for two to three hours to devote itself to its own fishy dreams.

The harpoon optics gave him a clear image. The Shetla was an ancient animal. On its back, the scabbed scars of having spent many years on the seabed were visible. Little smaglaks had latched onto its back. They treated the Shetla's wounds, gnawing off dead layers of skin and eating what the beast missed when it feasted on stalks and leaves on the seabed.

Very quietly, Telgar searched for the point where his harpoon had to penetrate in order to kill the Shetla quickly and painlessly. A gentle push of his thumb activated the target search. But technology was not everything—he knew exactly how much the water's surface broke the light; he *felt* rather than saw where he had to shoot. Slowly, he pulled his arm back and then released the harpoon with full force.

A deep hum accompanied it as it moved across the horizon. The surface of the water vibrated, causing small waves to form, which continued from behind his boat to the shore hundreds of meters in front of him. The Shetla sensed that something was wrong. It quickly took in more air, then disappeared back under the water. The perfect moment to throw the harpoon had never come.

Telgar slowly lowered his right arm. A few hundred meters above him, a plane flew by. Threateningly, Telgar raised his left arm, his *normal* arm, and shook his hand in impotent rage against the steel monster that had turned his nearly successful hunting day into another day of waiting.

Frustrated, he attached his boat to the boom of their raft. Elsha and Trak, his two adult children, looked at him expectantly.

"The plane..." he began.

But Elsha interrupted him. "We saw everything from here, father. It was the city dwellers. They're not supposed to fly here." She stomped her foot on the metal bottom of the boom. "They promised not to fly here."

Telgar sighed. "So many promises have already been broken. They have not kept many agreements. They look like us and speak the same language. We read the same books, love the same shows. But...they are not like us. How can it be that we have to abide by every agreement while they treat us as if we are slaves?"

Furious, he looked out at the water. In the distance, he sensed the edges of the next steel island. He resisted the urge to aim the harpoon at it. He knew what the island looked like: technology, steel, an artificial structure.

"They eat our sea." He turned to his two children. "They eat our food. They will soon eat our souls as well. This must end."

Trak cocked his head. "What do you mean, father?"

Telgar looked at his tall children. His family was big; they needed a lot of food. Until now, he had managed to take care of everyone. His wives and their other husbands were healthy, their children well-behaved. They lived on a large raft that offered space for everyone and was equipped with all the technical innovations that life on Reyan had to offer. If Trak or Elsha found a partner, they would decide which raft they wanted to continue to live on. Both families would certainly be proud to take in another *talking fish*. But from year to year, it became more difficult to earn enough to satisfy their needs.

Telgar sighed. "I think there has to be an end to the constant yielding. If city dwellers want more land, we clear it. If city dwellers want more ocean, we give them the ocean. If the city dwellers want to build another island, we move away. We pretend

it's their world. The world belongs to neither them nor to us—it belongs to the fish, the birds, the insects. They were all here before we came. But if we are not careful, all these animals will disappear as if they had never existed."

He kneaded his calloused hands. "I waited days to find a big Shetla. My mother's mother only needed to go out by boat and the sea was full of them. My mother-father-mother-mother told her that, at the time, almost all the islands belonged to us. The mud creepers lived in a single city, far out in the dead water. They promised to search only for mineral resources. They made a pact to talk about Reyan and the future."

Telgar was not a great orator. He could remain silent for hours waiting for something to bite. He often sat quietly for hours and followed Ferrol's broadcasts, rarely laughing, almost never speaking while the others talked loudly around him. Now he could no longer remain silent; too many words had accumulated in him.

"The mud creepers broke every agreement," Telgar continued. "Of course not contractually, but in spirit. We are not masters of law. I remember how old Geshuk wanted to sue the government. What did it get him? Nothing. For years, he appeared again and again in court, surrounded by the city dwellers' lawyers, to fight for our cause. In the end, he was told that he did not have the right to speak for the fish. And that the treaty would no longer apply because we did not have an organization that represented us."

His children continued to look at him expectantly. "Why should we vote? Why should we put forward candidates who pretend to speak for the whole country in the cities? Why should we allow ourselves to be divided into districts made up of tiny islands when our abode is the vast sea? *They* deceive us by breaking the spirit of our agreement. Every time we hope to make them understand what we believe in, they shake our hands. They smile and speak fine words. Then they travel back to the city. Sometimes it takes weeks, sometimes months. But again and again, they break their own agreements. You can't negotiate with those mud creepers. We have to draw a line—now, here, today."

He crossed his arms. The faces of his children were thoughtful;

they looked at each other. It was Trak, his daughter, who spoke for both children to her father.

“Father, we have had similar considerations. And not just us, the wave-eaters think like us, the Good Catch twins, and even the old bio engineers from Gelat.”

Telgar was surprised. “You’ve spoken to all of them?”

“Yes, Father.” Trak also crossed his arms. This was a gesture that seemed all too familiar to him. This is what he had looked like when he negotiated with his father, without wanting to give in a single bit. “We talked to them. And we all agree: the time has come to represent our concerns.”

“But we’ve talked so many times,” Telgar said. “Perhaps the time has come to do more than talk.”

Trak looked at him defiantly, and Telgar sighed.

“I think you’re right,” Trak said.

Telgar entered the raft’s large living room. He loved this mixture of past and present, he loved that there was a room where his family followed Ferrol’s broadcasts together, ate together, celebrated together. This room was the heart of the raft.

On the wall hung the shreds of his father-father’s net. The shreds were all they could have saved after his father-father had gone on a final hunt. It was a death that had been granted mercifully to the old man. After a life of struggling against the dangers of the sea, his father-father had decided in a harsh winter to return to it for one last voyage. Either he would win against the Shetla and his family would have enough to eat for the winter, or he would lose and there would be one less hungry mouth on the raft.

When the day was over, there was indeed one less hungry mouth to feed.

On the wall hung a piece of metal with a beautiful shell crossed by blue and green veins attached. The shell was old, venerably so. In the second generation after landing, their ancestors had begun to

adapt to life with the sea. This shell had been taken from the seabed in the Bay of Twilight by a young man who could stay underwater for a long time. On a rope weighed down with pieces of metal, he had felt his way downward, to a sunless depth where normal lungs would have burst. He had groped around on the seafloor, grabbing the shell and stowing it in his bag. Then he had returned to the surface of the water with his treasure, slowly reaching his hands upward.

Along the wall were the tables with their computers. With them, they maintained their connection to the other families, following the news of Reyan and the other Ferron worlds. Telgar made sure that he and his children were not left behind by technological advancements. The children should know what was happening around them.

On the walls hung old photos, some of which were three-dimensional: family pictures, hunting trips, landscape shots. Telgar let his gaze wander over the walls for a while. The others in the room were silent. They knew this ritual of his, this unwinding before addressing his family.

Finally, he turned to the others. “You know that times have changed. You all know that our raft, like all other rafts in recent generations, has had to be anchored farther and farther away from the cities. To avoid the mud creepers. They followed us with their technology; with their dirt and their noise. We retreated farther. But by the next generation, they caught up with us. They only talk about progress and civilization, about technology and about minerals. They have long since decided that this planet belongs to them, not to us alone or to us together, but to them.”

Telgar paused for a moment. “We can’t back down further. There are no more seas to which we can flee from them. There are no more waters in which we can fish undisturbed. There are no more islands to retreat to when the sea is whipped by the wind and the spray hits the rafts. They have all but a handful of islands under their control. They pretend that the country has belonged to them from time immemorial and not to us. We can’t keep doing this without losing everything.”

Telgar's family didn't say a word. In recent years, they had often talked about how to proceed. They often talked about where their children should hunt. Some had even suggested that one should try to work together with the mud creepers. One could look for work in their factories, live on their islands, fly with their aircraft. They had discussed it many times, but it had always been Telgar to whom they had looked for a decision.

Telgar sighed. "I have decided. It's time to talk to the mud creepers. They invited us to a conference. But this time there will not be just talk and no action. We must seize this opportunity. I ask that we all take part in it. I will call the others to Kimmon so that we can agree to speak with one voice!"

Breathless silence filled the room. Kimmon was the only settlement on an island that was inhabited year-round. It was the old center of Ferron civilization on Rey; Kimmon was home to those who had chosen the oceans as their habitat. Allegedly, Ferrol's first ship had landed there. And there, the first settlers had built a settlement. Once a year, they all came to Kimmon to trade, discuss family relationships, even exchange young people for another raft for a year—often in conjunction with marriage plans.

Gredna, Telgar's older partner, took the floor. "For many years, no one has tried to unite the families. Why should you succeed now? What is so important that it can't wait the seven months until the next meeting? And why do *you* have to be the one who organizes it? Telgar, think! There is no plague that threatens us, no war that could break out, no earthquake that forces us to distribute the survivors of a catastrophe to other rafts."

Telgar knew each of the examples. The accusation was not unjustified. There were reasons one should wait seven months.

After Gredna, no one else spoke up. Everyone was waiting for his reply. He waited a few moments. Then a jolt went through his body. He looked at everyone in the room insistently.

"There *is* a plague that threatens us—the plague of mud creeper technology that eats land and sea and makes us sick, even if we try not to be infected. There is a war that threatens us, one in which we

lose island after island because we retreat. It is a war in which no blood is shed. A war that we are losing. There is an earthquake that threatens us, which does not shake the sea and land, but our innermost being. Maybe we won't be the last generation to live our way of life. We have adapted more and more to this planet, generation after generation. Our children are stronger, more resilient, more adapted to life here than we are. No one dies of the old diseases anymore, no one has to go hungry because they cannot consume the native flora and fauna."

He clenched his fists.

"But maybe we're going down the wrong path. Do we really want our children's children to work in the factories? Do we really want the rafts to be just a weekend house, a retreat, a nostalgic memory? If all these are not good reasons to call all families to a common decision, then I will give you one last reason."

He took a breath. The long speech was difficult for him.

"We are weak because we are separated. The mud creepers have settlements that are constantly connected because they receive orders from a single place. They have to comply with delivery quotas, hand over and receive personnel, replace equipment, and implement technical innovations. They speak with one voice. They drive us away one at a time. We are weak separately. If we learn to speak with one voice, they will have to listen to us."

Telgar gestured as he continued his explanation.

"They buy meat from us. They buy the Umbra. They want the skin and the bones for their export; they want our help when they are looking for mineral resources on the seabed and do not know the currents. But when we come to them to tell them to stop encroaching on our space, they just laugh. We need a voice so that we can tell them that they are no longer getting meat. No umbra. No skin. No bones. No one to help them. We will tell them that we —and by that I mean all of us, not only my families, not only the fifteen rafts of my other mothers' children, but really all of us—will only trade with them again when they honor the contracts we have made with them."

He looked over at Gredna. She lowered her head. He knew she didn't believe in what she had said earlier. After more than four decades at her side, he knew how to read her well. She was often the family's skeptic. She said what no one else dared to say. And today she had done the right thing again. She was the mouthpiece of the others.

No one disagreed with him.

"So it's decided. Tomorrow morning, I will leave." He turned to his two eldest children. "Elsha and Trak, you will both accompany me to Kimmon. I will try to talk to everyone. We will have to talk about who owns this planet. We will talk about who is our brother, who is our friend, and who is only an acquaintance to us. We will talk about what we want for our descendants. We will talk about what is good and what is true. And then, when we have all spoken, we will act."

2.

A Different World

Somewhere, sometime

Again, that brief moment of confusion. Again, the feeling of having traveled a great distance while the body had only taken one step.

It can hardly get worse, Rhodan thought. *Rofus in the past. War wherever you look. A huge mess. And then suddenly a miracle: the first Thort appears.*

Although he had left the fight behind, Rhodan was very careful when passing through the transmitter.

We don't know we won't show up in another combat zone on Rofus.

He took his first step and was immediately relieved.

This is not the gravity on Rofus. We've left the planet!

According to his estimate, the gravity was slightly more than that of Earth. And the atmosphere was breathable.

Lucky. Without the combat suits, we'd be in serious trouble...

Rhodan looked around. The room with the target transmitter seemed clean, almost sterile. *A bit like the storage room in a hospital*, he thought. There was a locked door, or rather a bulkhead, but he did not see any opening mechanism. It was the only way to leave the sparsely furnished room. In addition, there was a shelving unit, but it was empty.

Behind Rhodan was the transmitter. If necessary, they could leave the room the same way they had entered. But first he wanted to find out where and when they were.

Rhodan turned back to the doorway. Behind him, Reginald Bull,

Thora, Ras Tschubai, and the Ferrons Chaktor and Lossoshér positioned themselves in a semicircle, taking little Sue between them. They held their weapons nervously in their hands.

Tschubai had lowered his left hand to his leg. Sue's abilities had ensured that the gunshot wound on his left thigh had almost healed. New skin had formed over the bullet hole; an infection was out of the question. But the teleporter probably still felt a remnant of the injury in the tense situation.

It's a miracle that he can walk at all, Rhodan thought to himself. "No danger!" he told the others.

Tschubai looked back skeptically at the transmitter. "Are we counting on being pursued?"

"I don't expect so," Rhodan replied. "Where are we?" he turned to the two Ferrons.

"Gravity, atmosphere...everywhere and nowhere," Lossoshér replied.

"If I had to guess a planet, I would bet on Reyan," said Chaktor.

"How did you come up with that?"

"An impressive guess based on existing data," Chaktor replied.

Rhodan was about to object to this decidedly unscientific procedure when the door opened in a flowing movement upward. He raised his gun. The others instinctively expanded their circle, making it harder for a potential attacker to hit them at the same time.

The being entering the room was a male humanoid. He was about 180 centimeters tall, light-skinned, stocky. Rhodan could not clearly assign his skin color to any Earthly region or nationality. His legs were clothed in brown boots and wide-cut brown pants. Around his upper body, he wore a kind of shawl or cloak, which was attached to the left shoulder with a large clasp.

A brooch, Rhodan corrected himself, *not a clasp*. The stranger had

a face whose age was hard to guess. Wrinkles could be seen around his eyes and in the corners of the mouth that had burrowed deep into the skin. But they didn't give his face a sour expression. It seemed more like he had smiled often in his life. His eyes were the most impressive feature, almost gray in color but mixed with orange speckles, as if suns were reflected in his eyes.

Rhodan was surprised. This man was very different from what he had expected. He didn't seem like an attacker, but rather like an old friend with whom you had talked while you were pushed on the swing in your parents' yard.

The man stretched his open hands away from the body with his thumbs turned upwards until he stood in front of them with his empty hands spread and arms outstretched.

A universal sign of peaceful intentions, Rhodan realized.

The man leaned forward cautiously. Slowly, he straightened up again. "Welcome, welcome!" His voice was almost musical. His words sounded Ferron to Rhodan's ears. Had the stranger really spoken out loud?

Yes, Rhodan pondered, *he speaks Ferron, albeit with a peculiar accent.*

"Where are we?" he asked the stranger. "And, while we're at it, *when* are we? And as a third question, who are you? And how did you know we had arrived?"

The stranger laughed. The wrinkles around his eyes and corners of his mouth deepened a little as his whole face burst into a cheerful smile. "Once again: welcome, welcome! I can assure you that you will receive answers to all your questions. But first I have to ask you to follow me." Without waiting for a reaction, he turned to the exit.

Bull took the decision from Rhodan and hurried past to follow the old man. "You can't just run away! Hello! Who are you? Where are we? *When* are we? What do you want from us? What do you know about the transmitter network? Are you even listening to me?

Hello! It would be nice if you...”

Bull’s voice became quieter as they turned around the next corner of the hall.

Rhodan let the squad proceed a little. The small group again protectively kept Sue in the middle. He and Thora took a quick look at each other. He understood what she wanted to tell him with that look. Together, they stayed slightly behind; formally, to secure the rear of the group.

“What do you think?” whispered Rhodan.

“I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all,” was Thora’s reply. Take a look around.” She pointed to the walls and floor of the corridor. “This is not Arkonide or Ferron technology.”

“Not of Earth either...”

Thora gave him a devastating look. “As if people had technology that could build something like this!”

Rhodan left her interjection unanswered.

“Not any technology I know of,” she continued.

“So, once again we don’t know what to expect.”

“Right!” she agreed.

Rhodan thought for a moment. “This means that we must be prepared to flee at any time.”

“I agree.”

He looked at her skeptically. Apparently, her statement was made in all seriousness. “Thora, this is my suggestion: We’ll change our order. You walk as far forward as possible. Keep an eye on the hall and the old man. You have more experience with foreign technology than any of us; you may notice something that escapes the rest of us. And I will inform our companions in turn that we must continue to be particularly careful. Agreed?”

She looked at him indecisively for a moment. “Agreed,” she replied.

They swapped positions with Chaktor and Lossoshér, immediately taking over the rear of the group. Rhodan briefed the Ferrons as Thora made her way to the front.

After Chaktor and Lossoshér were brought up to speed, Rhodan spoke with Sue. It was amazing how quickly she got used to the fact that her whole life had been turned upside down. She sometimes seemed so weak, so small; Rhodan, however, had learned that she could be quite tough and stubborn. She accepted his warning without question.

Next was Ras Tschubai, who tried to walk with Bull, who was speaking like a waterfall to the silent stranger. It was easy to talk to Tschubai because Bull drowned out any chance of the man at the front hearing them.

Thora was standing on the other side, taking turns looking at the old man and looking ahead through the corridor in front of them. Even with Tschubai, it did not take long to explain to him what Thora and Rhodan had discussed. He didn’t say a word in response; he just gave a thumbs up.

After a few minutes of following the seemingly endless corridor, they reached what appeared to be a large meeting room. Rhodan briefly estimated the size—about ten by six meters. Windows were not visible and there was no furniture.

They entered. Behind them, the door closed.

The old man turned to them. “I promised you answers.” He looked at the members of the group, one after the other.

Rhodan felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck. *Something is wrong here.* His gaze fell to Thora. She was just as tense as he was.

The old man put his hand on the wall. It became transparent, as if blinds were raised in a blink of an eye, uncovering a window. The scene was fascinating; they were looking at a strange world from a

bird's eye view.

Are we in some kind of spaceship or airplane? Rhodan wondered. He remembered his training. He had to memorize how to calculate how high to fly when devices failed. He tried to estimate the small islands below in terms of their size and had to do a little math in his head before reaching an altitude of six to eight kilometers, taking into account the size of the window and a superficial estimate of the size of the islands.

If this is a window and not a projection, if the atmosphere is comparable in optical terms to Earth, if the island size is comparable to that of the Polynesian islands, and if we have not been shrunk to ant size by the friendly gentleman... Rhodan realized how much of his estimate was guesswork.

Thora looked at him sternly as if to banish his gaze. He returned her look and she pointed to the ground behind the old man. Her lips formed a word. It took him a moment to make the connection. She was trying to whisper "shadows" to him in English without the others becoming aware. It was clever of her. The translator could only translate aloud what you were saying, but it could not make you understand words you were merely shaping with your lips. So the stranger had to either read minds or speak English and see her lips to understand what Thora was trying to communicate.

Shadows, Rhodan pondered. What did *Thora* mean by that? His gaze fell on the ground. There, he could see their shadows in the light falling through the window, but the old man did not cast one.

A projection! Rhodan suddenly realized. *They just wanted to lure us out of the transmitter room!*

The old man looked directly into his eyes, as if he had known what suspicions were forming in Rhodan. A smile played over his lips. Suddenly, Rhodan could see the bare wall behind him through his face.

The man became transparent, his edges fraying, dissolving into thin air. *Just like Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat,* Rhodan thought. And like the cat, the body of the stranger became completely

transparent, only his grin hanging in the air for a moment before it too finally disappeared.

Rhodan turned to the door. It immediately opened. In the frame stood a shimmering silver, oval robot almost two meter high, with four arms. Each arm ended in a weapon, the ends of which faced the group, glowing red. Rhodan took a step back. Behind the first robot, he saw at least three more in the hall. They gently but firmly pushed the group away from the door. Behind them, the door closed silently again.

“Crap!” Bull cursed under his breath.

3.

Stranger in a Strange World

Somewhere, sometime

My view fell to the familiar devices. It was a strange feeling. I had already spent so many years here, yet there was no feeling of *coming home* when I entered the ship's central command. I was a stranger here—a stranger despite the long time.

The ship and I have been traveling together for so long. We've had our difficulties time and time again. Like in a relationship, we often clashed, but we always came to an agreement. Or, more honestly, we compromised. I had not always emerged victorious from these disputes. At the moment, however, it looked as if we were heading for a dispute that we could not settle amicably.

"The transfer was neither announced, nor is it authorized," the ship told me.

So many times had I tried to bring a little *normality* into my work processes. One of my better ideas was to adapt my environment to my needs. Many years ago, I had changed the sound of the ship's voice so that it sounded like that of a beautiful woman. Nevertheless, the content of the words this time was not as pleasant as the computer's voice.

"I will lead the invaders away from my vital zones to eliminate them."

Is that what I want? Do I really want the strangers to be destroyed? I listened to myself. The prevailing feeling was that of surprise. I didn't know where the strangers had come from. I didn't know what they were doing on board my ship or how they had managed to overcome the security measures.

I still had time to think. The ship wanted to remove them from the vital zones before acting.

The video was outstanding. The ship showed crystal clear, sharp images. I looked at the group. Their clothes were dirty; parts were in tatters. They had not been washed for a long time.

One had obviously been recently injured on his leg; his pants were speckled with blood. There was no high-level technology to be seen. My interest was piqued: *How did they manage to get onto the ship?*

Two members of the group appeared to be Ferrons. Men who walked side by side but had little to say to each other. The other group seemed to belong together—but wait, one woman was from a different planet than the rest. The monitoring instruments showed fundamental differences in her physique. She alone was a second group. But she spoke animatedly with at least one of the men in the third group.

That third group consisted of individuals of different genders and skin colors. A dark-skinned man, a young woman, and then a red-haired, stocky man who peppered the projection with questions. The most interesting character, however, was the man who had fallen back with the woman to talk.

The group had accepted the projection's authority and followed it without resistance. The ship had reacted quickly to their appearance and created an image that did not seem strange or threatening to them. I had to acknowledge that the projection was a masterpiece—awe-inspiring, interesting, good-willed, mysterious, yet ready to talk.

I didn't have to look at the ship's map to know where they were headed. It was leading them to one of the empty rooms in the periphery. Even if the strangers had unseen weapons, it was practically impossible to damage the vital zones of the ship from there. A smart choice.

What shall I do?

The group followed the projection until they arrived at their destination. It gave them a glimpse of the planet's surface. As everyone was distracted by the sight, the ship made arrangements

to implement its announcement. The projection slowly dissolved. Robots had taken up position in front of the room.

I have to come to an agreement with the ship. "Their weapons are lowered," I informed it superfluously. "They don't seem to have any hostile intentions. I disagree with your assessment that they must be eliminated."

"They are not authorized," the ship replied immediately. "And they are armed. Our mission is too important for us to take any risks. Correct?"

I hated it when the ship asked these rhetorical questions. It could only argue in a narrow mental corridor. *Authorization*, *armament*, *mission*, *risk*. These were the parameters in which the ship could think and decide.

I watched the strangers. A strange mixture. Who were they? What had brought them together? What were they looking for? "Let me think for a moment," I instructed the ship. "The strangers do not pose an acute danger at the moment. Don't act before I come to a decision." My gaze fell on the group again. They had been crowded together by the robots in the room. The strangers tried to keep the young female in the middle to protect her. And the peculiar woman, *the second group*, was consciously or unconsciously protected by the slender man who seemed to be the leader. They had no chance, but they showed no desperation.

I came to a decision. "I am the scout, you are my ship. Our task is also to collect and exploit knowledge. The strangers do not pose a danger to the ship or to me. That is why I hope that we will first find out how they could get on board."

The ship's response lasted a tiny but palpable moment. *It has to think.*

"I acknowledge that the strangers are not a danger at the moment. However, I warn against being defenseless against them, as the assessment of their danger is based on incomplete data."

"I agree. I will question them myself."

“You don’t have to expose yourself to such danger.” Once again, the ship was thinking only within its usual parameters. “There is information that can only be absorbed in direct conversation,” I protested.

The ship knew that it was inferior to any living organism in reading nonverbal communication. But it wasn’t that easy to beat. “I recommend adapting your appearance to that of the strangers.”

“I agree.” I activated the corresponding devices so that I did not differ externally from one of the light-skinned intruders. Then I got up and set off.

The robots moved to the side. The strangers were laying down their weapons. Apparently, they had figured death was near or realized that resistance to our superior technology was pointless. Surprisingly, no terror was reflected in their faces as I entered the room.

So, I had successfully adapted my appearance. They looked at me curiously.

One, the tall slender man, quickly spoke up. “We are pleased that someone has come to talk to us.” *A brave man.*

“Who are you?” I asked. “Where are you from?”

“My name is Rhodan. Perry Rhodan. We have come directly from Rofus. And who are you?”

He is also clever and curious, I added to my first assessment. “My name doesn’t matter. You can call me ‘the scout’ if you need a name for me.”

“Good.” It was up to this Rhodan again to answer me. The others seemed to have tacitly recognized him as their leader even now. He turned to his group. “My companions are the Ferrons, Chaktor and Lossoshér...” He pointed to the two blue-skinned humanoids. “...Thora and Sue Mirafiore, Reginald Bull, and Ras Tschubai.”

I memorized their names. My next question was pure speculation: “You’re not from Rofus, are you?”

Rhodan didn't seem surprised by my question. "You're right, scout. We come from far away and are looking for a friend, a scientist named Crest da Zoltral. As part of our search, we involuntarily ended up on Rofus—on an alien planet, trapped in another time. On Rofus, we had to escape a war and ended up here. Didn't you happen to hear about Crest da Zoltral? Has he perhaps arrived here before us?"

"No." So, there was someone who had used a transmitter before them. Had he also ended up here? The ship would have told me if there had been an intruder. Nevertheless, I inconspicuously activated the protective field so that the following conversation could not be overheard by the group. "Ship," I turned to my companion, "was there another intruder before this group?"

"No," its voice sounded audibly in my right ear.

"And their story that they were transferred in time? Is this plausible based on our data?" I was curious about the ship's assessment.

"There is no data to support the strangers' statements," it replied calmly.

"But they seem...authentic."

"I cannot judge whether they pose a threat. But I warn again against too much contact with them. I continue to recommend their elimination."

"Ship, I am protected. You know it. I know it. Their weapons cannot harm me."

I deactivated the connection and the protective field. The group around Rhodan waited until I addressed them again. I re-examined the humanoids. They didn't look like a landing squad or a boarding squad. They were torn down, injured, dirty, and exhausted. They were not able to harm me or the vessel. And their story was...incredible. Unbelievable, yes, but perhaps not impossible.

"We told you who we are." Again, it was Rhodan who started the

conversation. I watched him. He was controlled; despite the certainly threatening situation for him, he managed to conduct the conversation with me confidently. “But who are you?” ‘Scout’ is not a name, just a designation. Where are we? What kind of ship is this? Can you tell us what era or year we are in?”

I was honestly surprised. Rhodan had a lot of courage. Instead of being intimidated by the superior technology, instead of showing respect for the activated weapon arms of the robots, he still spoke as though he were in an equal position of power. As if it were quite normal to enter a spaceship without being asked and to start a conversation with the ship’s captain about who you were and where you intended to travel.

But why did they so desperately want to know *when* they were? Obviously, they were familiar with the concept of traveling through time. Didn’t they know what era they had ended up in? Or did they just want to find out what unit of time I used in order to discover something about me? Unlikely, extremely unlikely. But there was more than one secret surrounding these strangers.

“I can’t answer your questions.” I was curious, so I wanted to keep the conversation going. “The term ‘scout’ describes me well. I don’t want to tell you my name; just accept that I am satisfied if you address me as Scout. The other questions...I can’t answer them until I learn more about you.”

Would they see through my ruse to buy time? Had I scared them? Apparently, they were getting scared. Rhodan—who else?—waved, and they all approached the little woman in the middle. The dark-skinned man stretched out his hand to her. She grabbed her hand. A touching gesture. She couldn’t be his daughter. His partner? Or was this a gesture meant to convey comfort in the face of overpowering danger? The others crowded tightly around the two in the middle, who closed their eyes. A religious ceremony? Farewell words, perhaps a prayer. But that didn’t suit the group.

Something was wrong here. They seemed to be afraid for their lives. How could I make them understand that they had nothing to fear? Suddenly, the voice of the ship sounded in my ear, without having activated the protective field so that his words could be

heard by everyone in the room.

“Danger! I measure higher order activity. Scout, get yourself to safety immediately. I will eliminate the strangers!”

The weapon arms of the robots twitched upward.

“No!” But it was too late. The ship had decided without asking me for my opinion. I clenched my seven fingers into my fist. “You have—”

The ship interrupted me. “They are...gone.”

I looked up. I was alone with the robots.

4.

Doctor Who?

Underwater Dome

October 4, 2036

Dr. Eric Manoli took another look at the screen. He had reviewed the data twice without coming to any further conclusions.

He sighed. He didn't need to check the blood values a third time. He reached forward and deactivated the screen.

"Patient Manoli is perfectly healthy," he murmured. "So why am I so terribly tired? Something is wrong with me." He crossed his fingers, stretching them until his joints cracked. Then he pushed himself up from the office chair. "Or you're just getting old."

To the left of his desk was his beloved coffee cup. The inscription *I'm a doctor, not an engineer* would forever remain a mystery to him. His American friends in astronaut training had given it to him. Supposedly, it was an allusion to a nearly hundred-year-old television show.

Anyway, he had never understood the joke.

But he kept the cup because of the nice logo: *United Federation of Planets*. That sounded like a promise that had yet to come true for the Terrans in the present.

He took a deep sip of black coffee. It didn't wake him up as much as he had hoped for. But he still had a few hours of working time ahead of him. He couldn't afford to be inattentive or tired.

The microphone on the wall crackled. "Doctor Manoli, you're the only one we're waiting for." The voice spoke English with a strong accent.

Manoli walked over to the intercom and pressed the voice

button. “Manoli here. Excuse me, I had something urgent to do. I’ll be out in five minutes.”

“All right.” A crackle let him know that the connection had been severed.

Manoli’s coat hung on the stand behind the door; his travel bag was packed on the floor next to it. All he had to do was collect his doctor’s bag and he would be ready to go.

That’s when we stepped into space, met the Arkonides—and I still carry a bag around with me like a country doctor of the nineteenth century. His gaze fell to the antiquated intercom. *There are still areas of the world where civil war and exploitation have ensured that the medical care of the population is far below the standard. And in these clinics, we have technical equipment that ensures that the working day is as unpleasant as possible.*

He turned off his computer, draped the coat over his arm, and reached for the two bags. At the door, he turned around again. “Take care, lab. Who knows when we’ll see each other again,” he said to the empty room.

“Doctor Manoli? Could I see your keycard?”

Manoli rustled around in his pockets but couldn't find the key card. Then he awkwardly put on his coat. In the right outer pocket he found the card — including the clip which he usually used to attach it to his shirt. “There you go.”

The female guard did not smile, sliding the card through a reading device and then comparing the face on the card with the face of the man standing in front of her.

“Doctor Manoli, please walk down the hall. At the end, someone from the submarine crew will welcome you. Have a good trip!”

Manoli picked up his two bags and strolled down the hall. *Submarine crew*, he thought. *I’m an astronaut, not a sailor.* But the only way to the deep-sea dome off the Azores was to arrive by

submarine. *And yet*, Manoli thought, *eventually, we will have transmitters everywhere. Then such trips will be superfluous. I'll walk through an archway here and immediately be in the dome.*

Below was another guard, but she was content to compare the image of his card with his face. "You may pass!"

He entered the submarine through the port. It was far more spacious than a rocket. Manoli had no difficulty being in confined spaces. *Luckily, I'm not too tall*, he thought when he saw how low the ceilings were.

He was assigned a seat. An officer was soon standing next to him. "Doctor Manoli, welcome on board! My government has decided to transport you inconspicuously...underwater. This takes only a bit longer than by plane. According to our schedule, we should be at the deep-sea dome in six hours. I hope you won't have any difficulties with the tight space here on board."

Manoli looked at the officer piercingly. "I'm an astronaut. This is significantly more space than was available in the *devices* I've been using so far."

The officer looked less than enthusiastic.

I guess my tone was a bit harsh, Manoli thought. "I'm sorry, the fame must have gone a little to my head. For a while it looked as if every person associated with Perry Rhodan was known worldwide."

The officer's facial expressions showed signs of real amazement. Only now did he seem to realize who his passenger was. "Excuse me. It's my fault. I should have recognized you, but so much has happened in the last few weeks."

Manoli made a dismissive hand gesture. "No problem. Just get me safely to the dome and I'll be happy."

The officer said goodbye and disappeared.

Manoli sighed. *As if I didn't have enough problems.* With a click, he opened his doctor's bag and pulled out a brown binder. Even during his studies, his fellow students had made fun of the fact that he

printed out many things instead of viewing them on a screen. He loved to hold paper in his hands. He worked best when he was allowed to take notes with three different colored pens. Even later in life, on his famous flight to the moon, he had brought paper with him. He had to smile when he thought about how he had smuggled in an SF magazine.

Manoli turned his attention back to his documents. The folder contained two stacks of paper stapled together. One contained the medical records of a body he knew very well: his own. The second batch contained the documents on Crest.

Manoli leafed through the papers on his own body. *Nothing.* He stuffed them back in the folder and turned his attention to the second batch.

"Name: Crest. Place of birth: Unknown. Date of birth: Unknown. Gender: Male," he read aloud softly. He had written *Arkonide* in the field for religion—unfortunately there was no field for the planet of origin in the patient files. *This, too, is something that we urgently need to introduce.*

Crest was a medical mystery to him. There were so many similarities to a normal human being that it was completely unbelievable that the Arkonide came from another solar system. And then there were again significant differences such as the completely differently designed chest.

So many indications of cancer. Crest would have died of the disease long ago if he had been human. His body had amazing resistance. And Manoli knew from his own experience that Crest had an iron will.

Did I really do everything right? He put the documents back. *It's no coincidence that Crest disappeared through the transmitter after learning about his incurable cancer. Should I have dealt with him differently?*

He picked up the medical records again. *Cancer. Hopefully, we'll also learn from the aliens how to defeat diseases like this.* He drummed his fingertips on the backrest. *Without my diagnosis, Crest would not have gone through the transmitter. If Crest hadn't gone through the*

transmitter, Bull and Rhodan wouldn't have had to follow him. It's been over two weeks. Perry, Bull…what happened? He breathed slowly, calming himself. *It's not my fault. But maybe I can fix it.*

He put Crest's medical record aside. For the rest of the trip, Manoli immersed himself in a tattered science fiction paperback.

The security check at the entrance of the underwater dome was more strenuous than the one before boarding the submarine. The guard did not even look up when he asked for Manoli's name.

"Doctor Manoli."

"Doctor who?"

Manoli looked at the man. The face of the well-trained man was dominated by a lower jaw that gave the soldier a very strict facial expression. He carefully read the name tag that the man wore on his chest.

"Sergeant Kordas," he addressed the soldier. "My name is Manoli. M for moon flight, A for Arkonides, N for nuclear…"

The soldier looked up in surprise. When he recognized Manoli, he suddenly realized who he had in front of him. "Ex…cuse me," he stuttered. I didn't know…"

"No problem." Manoli held out his card to him. "This happens to me all the time." He left the stunned guard behind. His appointment was waiting for him in the entrance area of the dome.

Manoli observed the historian through the stained glass window. At first glance, the man seemed a little younger than himself. Instead of Manoli's full head of hair, he had a half-bald head. Aescunnar was a bit taller as well, 180 centimeters, Manoli estimated.

The historian's appearance corresponded to what Manoli had heard about him. Aescunnar wore green-brown spotted army pants plus a sweater that would have looked good on a polar expedition. His feet were in army boots. Only the cowboy hat, which was mentioned in some articles on the Internet, was missing. *Maybe the*

half-bald will explain why he always wears that thing on his head in pictures.

“Doctor Manoli, I suppose.” They shook hands. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. After all, you are a kind of living legend…”

Manoli made a dismissive gesture. “I was just the right man at the right time in the right place.”

His counterpart immediately changed the subject. “How was your trip?”

“Uneventful, thank you.”

“I would suggest that I first show you your quarters. We can meet afterwards for dinner. Then we'll have time for a serious conversation.”

“Agreed,” Manoli said. He looked briefly at his watch. “In an hour?”

Aescunnar accepted immediately.

In his quarters, Manoli freshened up a little. He put his things in the closet, took a skeptical look at the bed, and briefly searched for a minibar in vain. Then he put on a fresh shirt.

Aescunnar was on time. They first ordered their meal, and Manoli was surprised by the food on offer. The base’s cuisine was an interesting mix of American and Russian food, as well as some peculiar oddities noted as *Arkonide* on the menu. Aescunnar saw Manoli’s skeptical gaze and explained to him that this was only intended to indicate that the food had been made with the help of devices from the dome. They were probably not representative of Arkonide cuisine.

After ordering, Aescunnar told Manoli about exploring the secret station. Although he had read the reports, it was interesting to learn about the discoveries directly from the historian. He thought the historical finds in the station were especially fascinating, as Aescunnar explained that they had already found all sorts of

artifacts from human history. In addition to samples of fauna and flora, coins from all eras, and in some cases still unidentified Arkonide memorabilia, there were some objects that were not part of a collection. Aescunnar vividly talked about a trident that he had not yet been able to assign to any earthly civilization, as well as books with sketches that, according to his research, described in detail the Nordic place of worship at Oertel in Sweden.

"Manoli, imagine...this collection is pieced together from all regions and epochs of the world. But that's not the strangest thing. Some of it has obviously been improved with Arkonide technology! Historical pieces that suggest they were on Earth for centuries, if not millennia." The historian was completely enthusiastic. "I've seen things. I have no idea what some of them were for. A sword that would appear to be from the twelfth century but harder and sharper than anything that was technically possible at that time. Minoan armor equipped with an aggregate that could surround the wearer with a protective screen. Do you know what that means?"

"That the wearer of the armor was quite difficult to defeat," Manoli replied humorously.

"But the sagas!" replied Aescunnar. "Think of the consequences that these finds have for our history! Was Odysseus an Arkonide in such armor? Avalon—did Arthur receive the sword Excalibur from an Arkonide so that he could unite Britain?"

"Well," commented Manoli, "isn't that a little far-fetched?"

Aescunnar winked at him. "Doctor Manoli, you should know for yourself that the Arkonides have opened the doors of knowledge. Much is no longer as we thought."

"True," the doctor agreed. "We are definitely no longer the only sentient species in the universe!"

"Exactly. And think about what this means for all the things we think we know about ourselves and the cosmos. Space travel and astronomy, but also religion and sociology. And let's not forget, history!" The historian smiled happily. Then he rubbed his stomach. "I'm full. What shall we do now?"

After dinner, they both ordered a coffee. Aescunnar then leaned back in his chair. “Manoli, I’ve been talking about our discoveries this whole time. But that’s not why you came here, is it?”

Manoli followed suit, balancing the half-full coffee cup and saucer in his right hand. “You’re right, Aescunnar. I was told that you don’t like to respond when official bodies send you a request.

The historian only smiled eloquently.

“All right,” Manoli said. “So, I decided to ask you directly. And, I’ll admit, I was eager to meet you face to face. You are preceded by a certain reputation.”

His companion continued to smile but thoughtfully moved his coffee mug to his right hand.

“Good,” said Manoli. “Let’s get down to business. Have you found any evidence of other Arkonide stations or facilities in the solar system?”

The historian looked at him in amazement: “No, I’m sorry to disappoint you. But I wouldn’t be surprised if there were still dozens. Why do you ask?”

“I had hoped to find a clue as to Perry Rhodan’s whereabouts.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know that Crest went through a transmitter with Tatiana Michalovna and the Topsidan Trker-Hon?”

“Of course. Everyone here knows that. The explosion in which the transmitter was destroyed shook the whole plant.”

“That’s what I thought. What you don’t know is that Rhodan used another transmitter in the Vega system to find Crest and his companions. He has yet to return.”

“Wow!” said Aescunnar. “I had no idea...”

“No wonder. We can’t follow because the transmitter in the Vega

system can't be adjusted to the same counterpart again. Why, we can't say. But we have to consider that it may have been destroyed. Guards have been set up everywhere in that system in case someone steps out of a transmitter, but..." Manoli left the sentence hanging in the air.

"But so far no one has stepped out of a transmitter," Aescunnar concluded.

"Right. For two weeks there has been no sign of life from Rhodan."

"You're worried. That's understandable. But how can I help you?"

Manoli put down the cup and saucer. "Aescunnar, we found a transmitter in this Arkonide dome. So couldn't we find more transmitters in other Arkonide bases? A transmitter with which we can follow Rhodan, Bull, and their companions?"

5.

From Bad to Worse

Reyan, sometime

The cold wind hit Rhodan like a punch in the face. He knew the feeling—he was falling.

He tried to blink, but the wind was much too strong, and he couldn't open his eyes for more than a split second. Squinting, he looked down. Below him, far below him, he saw the surface of the ocean.

He was on the lookout for the others. Tschubai and Sue were still holding hands. The others had been transferred with them, but they had detached themselves from each other when they had materialized outside.

His training as a risk pilot paid off. Rhodan knew how to delay his fall as a skydiver. He spread his arms and legs to create the highest possible air resistance and saw that Bull was doing the same. Thora also seemed to know how to deal with the situation. Chaktor's military background helped, as he also tried to slow down his fall.

Unfortunately, this was not the case with their companions, and Sue and Lossoshér were falling like stones towards the water. With every second, the teleporter moved farther away from the group. Rhodan knew there was no point in shouting.

The unforgiving wind tears the words from your lips, his instructor had always said.

He managed to turn his head so that he could take a look behind him. Far above them hovered the scout's ship. From the outside, the spaceship looked like a huge blue-gray disk. The size could not be estimated due to a lack of reference points, and Rhodan did not know what material the shell was made of.

He looked down again. *Too high. We are too high. We can't survive an impact from this height. The water is as hard as concrete when you hit from a height of more than a hundred meters.*

It was not possible to draw his companions' attention to slow down their fall. Thora and Bull were the only ones who stayed near him. But this would only delay their impact and inevitable death.

Rhodan looked around. He kept blinking, and sharp, stabbing wind brought tears to his eyes. Below, the ocean stretched from horizon to horizon. *Reyan, the Ferron water world!*

This realization did little to help him now. He tried to find any sign of a settlement. On two of the distant islands, he recognized buildings that looked like factories. So there was a Ferron settlement, at least some sort of industrial site. But it seemed unlikely to him that the sky would be scanned for falling aliens. And even if they were spotted, how could they be helped? Would the locals set up a trampoline?

Rhodan thought about how he had gotten into this situation. *Is this my life passing before my eyes as I die?* Their secret mission, the flight to the moon. Their encounter with an extraterrestrial civilization. Their return to Earth. The events in the Gobi Desert, beginning with the siege by the Chinese army, which they had survived only because they were protected by an Arkonide energy shield. They had been just a handful of people who had opposed the governments of the world.

He had seen so much more than he had ever dared to dream of. So many secrets. Now, he would no longer find out what had happened to Ernst Ellert.

But I saw more than I could have hoped for. He tore himself away from his thoughts and looked again at his companions. Tschubai made no attempt to teleport anywhere. Where to, anyway? Higher up to delay their deaths without ultimately being able to prevent them? The islands and the ships were too far away. Tschubai hung like a wet sack in the sky.

He's probably powerless from the effort of the jump, Rhodan

thought. *A merciful fate...*

Lossoshér was falling the fastest. If no miracle happened now, he would hit the surface of the water and die immediately.

Below them, the water broke open in several places. In five of them, huge gray-blue bodies pushed themselves into the air. At first glance, they looked like nuclear submarines that were rising up after a long dive as the water was pushed aside.

Wait! Rhodan caught a better look. These were not metallic objects, they were huge fish, not unlike whales, but with a narrow hump on their backs. The humps did not look like skin or scales—they were superstructures, like the huts on the backs of war elephants. Within the superstructures moved small creatures, Ferrons, who seemed to ride the animal.

The whale-like beasts continued to emerge from the water. An elastic net stretched between the superstructures and was slowly being lifted. Rhodan could make out the shape of a huge creature in the net, beating around with its fins. He could hardly guess how big the massive animal was. Surely it was over two hundred meters long. Its mouth opened and a long tongue unfurled. It curled up and then shot forward as if detached from a feather. It was aiming for the superstructures of the two whale-like creatures. Apparently, the monster could see that the nets were attached there.

Hopefully the others will react, Rhodan fervently wished.

Lossoshér saw his chance. At the last moment, he adjusted his fall and aimed to hit the net. Under him, it gave way elastically. He seemed to stick to the net like a fly on flypaper. He no longer moved and remained face down as he bounced up and down with the net.

Next, Tschubai and Sue crashed into it. Like Lossoshér, they remained in the same position they had fallen in.

Are we now to die in a fishing net after surviving this fall? Rhodan was preparing himself for the impact. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Chaktor, Thora, and Bull were taking similar

precautions.

Under him, the side flap of one of the superstructures opened. A huge harpoon appeared, bent downwards towards the head of the sea monster. Rhodan corrected his trajectory to land as far away from the animal as possible.

The impact was murderous. All the air was squeezed out of his lungs. He almost lost consciousness. *But no worse than a rocket launch*, he thought. He could move his head, though the rest of his body was stuck in the net. Above, the harpoon was heading for its target. With a loud hiss, it shot out of the launcher, smashed into the skull of the sea monster, and exploded.

The blow of the explosion threw Rhodan's head back. He fainted.

Waking up was not a pleasant process. Rhodan found he was tied up, and he was wet from head to toe. *But at least I'm alive.*

He opened his eyes only to close them again. Spray and foam blew in his face, but at least it made sure that he was wide awake. Something warm was pressing against him from the front. A body?

He opened his eyes again. Again, he felt the spray and the foam, and blinked to see better. He was moving at high speed over the surface of the water. His arms were tied around the body of a Ferron sitting in front of him. He leaned forward a little to be able to look over her shoulder.

"Well, finally awake?" someone said at the front. She had a bright, not unpleasant voice. Rhodan tried to move his hands. "Just don't let go," the warning came, "or you'll fall!"

He left his hands and arms where they were, but stretched as far as he could. Then he risked a longer look over their shoulders. In front of them, he saw the body of a large fish carrying a harness on its body. Their vehicle was attached to this harness. The driver was holding the two leashes in her hand, which she used to give instructions to the animal. The whole thing reminded him of a poster he had once seen at a store in San Francisco: a surfboard strapped to a seahorse almost two meters tall.

Around him, he saw a dozen more of these boards. Rhodan breathed a sigh of relief when he discovered that all his companions were passengers as well.

“You were incredibly lucky,” said the Ferron in the front.

Did she mean the crash, their stay on the foreign spaceship, or the shot with the harpoon? Rhodan wasn’t sure what information the young woman possessed. “What do you mean?”

“Well, the whip jellyfish have no objection to eating a Ferron as a treat.”

“Whip jellyfish... That was the animal with the rolled tongue?”

“Of course. What did it look like?”

“We’re not fishermen, so I’m not familiar with aquatic animals.”

“Are you...rural dwellers?”

Rhodan had heard the small pause in her sentence. That was why he hesitated to simply agree with her. “No and yes. We are rural dwellers, but not from here.”

The young woman sighed. “Good.”

Rhodan did not want to ask just yet what her answer meant. His stay in Ferron war zones had taught him that it was not wise to immediately assign himself to a side. “So, what are whip jellyfish?”

“If you really have no idea, I would like to help you.” She took a breath to drown out the driving noises with a loud voice. “The whip jellyfish are the biggest predators on all of Reyan. We Reyans are the only Ferrons who can hunt them.”

Rhodan noticed that she made a subtle distinction between *Reyans* and *Ferrons*. This was probably a development that always occurred sooner or later with colonies in space. The first colonists would feel like citizens of their homeworld, but future generations would develop their own lives and cultures until they insisted on maintaining their own government. *A development that I know only*

too well from America.

"Aha. My name is Perry Rhodan. How should I address you?"

"My name is Thiroki, dear Perrodan."

Well, given the ambient noise is so loud, her hearing and my translator are doing a reasonable job. Perrodan...

She turned her head back a little, looked at him fleetingly, and then looked forward again at the animal powering their trip. "Perrodan, you don't seem to come from Reyan. And you don't look like a normal Ferron either. Your skin color is too bright and your accent is foreign to me. Where are you from?"

Rhodan coughed as if to get the salt out of his throat. "We're not from Reyan, that's right. We crashed here..."

"Crashed? But then we would have known. A crashing spaceship is hard to miss."

Rhodan did not know if it was wise to satisfy his rescuer's curiosity with a clear lie. "It's a long story and not one easily explained..."

"I wouldn't have had time for a longer story anyway," she replied. "Look, we're almost there!"

Rhodan stretched to get another glance over her shoulder. In front of them lay an island, and on it, a settlement. In fact, the island was the settlement, because there was not a piece of the surface of the island to be seen; every part of it had been built on. The farther away the buildings were from the shore, the higher they were.

In the middle of the island were almost twenty-storey houses—gigantic compared to the small huts at the edge. From there, docks protruded into the sea, where ships of various sizes were moored. The water around the island was not overflowing with ships, but wherever Rhodan looked, he saw either a vehicle or an anchored raft. These rafts boasted residential buildings, some of them two stories tall.

“What’s the name of this settlement?” he asked.

“You really must be from far away if you don’t know that. This is Kimmon, the only settlement of the Reyans.”

Suddenly, she leaned to the right. Through his handcuffed hands around her stomach, Rhodan was pulled into the movement. The vehicle leaned to the side as it was forced into a tight right turn. A little later, Thiroki straightened up again, and Rhodan was forced to follow the movement.

“Excuse me!” she cried. “We were on a fishing expedition for four weeks. Now everyone wants to go to Kimmon, some faster than is good for them!”

She pointed ahead. Passing them, a vehicle approached the shore. Its rider did not have an outsider tied to him, so his speed was significantly higher than that of Thiroki’s. He was the reason they’d had to dodge obstacles so frantically.

The vehicle in front shot towards the shore. At the last moment, the rider straightened up, pushed his feet against the floor of his vehicle, and pulled on the lines with full force. His animal reared up, but it came to a stop a few meters from the shore. The vehicle bobbed a few more meters towards the jetty before it hit it with quiet movements.

“Perfect,” commented Thiroki. She turned to Rhodan. “But don’t worry, we’re going to make a calmer maneuver.” She pointed to the pier in front of them where the young Reyaner was frantically mooring his ship. “That is something for young men who want to impress their partners. I choose the calmer option. That’s where you arrive, but it’s less wet and less dangerous.”

Rhodan could not imagine that they were *less wet* than the young man on the other vehicle. But since he was tied to Thiroki, he did not find it the ideal moment to start an argument about the quality of the transport.

Half an hour later, he was standing on his own two feet on one of Kimmon’s jetties. The shackles had been loosened. *After all, we’re*

not in a war zone, he thought. Nevertheless, he instinctively observed at his surroundings, always on the lookout for a quick get-away if needed. *If that's necessary here...*

But escape was out of the question. On one side was the ocean. The ships didn't look as if they could be steered without previous experience. And even if that were possible, the Reyans could certainly handle a ship better than they could. An escape would not get them very far. Plus, Rhodan had no idea what condition his companions were in.

On the land side, there were six Reyaners, among them, Thiroki, who kept an eye on them. But they didn't seem hostile, so Rhodan used the time to take care of his companions. Except for Lossoshér, they were all in good spirits. The old Ferron was unconscious but thankfully not more seriously injured.

"Overexertion," Chaktor declared.

Rhodan calmly turned to his next problem child. "Ras, how are you?"

"Much better!"

He looked at the face of his counterpart. Tschubai was pale and the sea water had left salty crusts in the deepening lines of his face.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Honestly, no. But right now, my gifts are useless." Tschubai pointed with a far-reaching gesture to the ocean that surrounded them on all sides.

"Rest. Who knows when we might need you again!"

Rhodan then turned to his neighbor. Bull looked terribly exhausted. *It's no wonder after the events of the past hour.* Still, he decided to keep a close eye on his friend.

After that, Rhodan assured himself that the others were fine. They were all uninjured, or at least overall, everyone was fine, although no one had survived the crash without scratches and

injuries.

He again examined the guards. At first glance, they looked like normal Ferrons. But at second glance, they seemed different from each other and normal Ferrons. Thiroki, his companion, had webbed skin between her fingers. The young man next to her had an amazingly high voice. Rhodan recognized the beginnings of gills on his neck. Another woman had a barrel-shaped upper body. She probably had enormous lung capacity that allowed her to stay underwater for long periods of time.

Rhodan remembered what they had called themselves: Reyans, not Ferrons. Their development towards adaptation to a foreign environment had led to them splitting into at least two groups. The only common element was the adaptation to this planet.

From the center of the island, a group of soldiers approached. The men wore colorful uniforms that showed a stylized fish emblem on the upper body. They were probably the regular guards who'd been alerted by a member of Thiroki's group about the presence of strangers.

From afar, Rhodan heard them calling. "Hey, Thiroki, why do you bring those mud creepers to Kimmon?"

Rhodan identified the speaker as a middle-aged man who preceded the group of soldiers. His voice was sharp and extremely unpleasant.

Thiroki did not respond to them.

"Hey, Thiroki, didn't you hear me? Throw the mud creepers into the sea. Let's see if they can swim!"

Thiroki still did not react. The other guards around Rhodan's group also remained silent. Thiroki spoke only when the soldiers were a few steps in front of the guards.

"Good afternoon, Jebesh. I see you and your Kimmon guard are ready and able to throw defenseless visitors into the sea at any time."

The face of the young man whom Thiroki had referred to as Jebesh turned dark. “Thiroki, I represent the law on Kimmon!”

“Oh, the law.” She paused for a moment to leisurely inspect her right-hand fingernails. “Oh, I remember: You *represent* the law, but you are not the law.”

Jebesh’s voice became louder, almost hysterical. “Thiroki, I’m tired of the games you love to play. These strangers are rural dwellers and they have no place here. Organize a ship to take them to the area of the mud creepers or let them swim.”

Thiroki now looked at her left-hand fingernails. “Jebesh, if your eyes weren’t busy looking at me and mine, you’d have noticed that these aren’t normal Ferrons behind us.”

Jebesh took a good look at Rhodan and his group for the first time. His gaze lingered on the dark-skinned Tschubai, but also the two Ferrons, and then finally Bull. “If this is a joke...”

“No, Jebesh, it’s not. Except for the two Ferrons, the others are not from any colony that I know. This is bigger than you or me.” She paused for a moment. “I want Superior Alrad to judge them!”

If he was surprised by the demand, Jebesh didn’t let on. “Superior Alrad is in Rey.”

“If that is the case,” Thiroki replied, “then these strangers will be our guests until she returns.”

Again, Jebesh’s face turned red. “I cannot allow that! I am solely responsible for our safety here.”

Thiroki crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Jebesh, I have always believed that you are at least a man of supreme courage, though you are not blessed with superior intellect.”

The soldier’s face turned even redder. Rhodan wondered if he would leap forward and attack Thiroki’s neck. But nothing of the sort happened. Instead, Jebesh took a few deep breaths.

“What do you propose?”

“I suggest that we behave towards a group of shipwrecked mud creepers as we treat all guests who enter our settlements.”

“Guests?” whispered Bull to Rhodan. “I wouldn’t trust that Jebesh as far as I could throw him.”

“I agree,” Rhodan replied. “We should keep an eye on him.”

They had to stop their conversation as Thiroki turned to both of them. “Perrodan, you are now guests of the fishermen of Kimmon. I will escort you to accommodations where you can all wait for the return of Superior Alrad. Until then, you will have the opportunity to rest, and I will make sure that a doctor takes care of your unconscious companion.” She pointed at Lossoshér.

“Thank you. Will you guide us there?” Rhodan cast a skeptical look at Jebesh and his soldiers.

Thiroki became a little quieter. “He would not dare do anything to the Superior’s guests. But I do think it’s smarter for us to take you to your accommodations.”

Rhodan and his companions enjoyed walking through Kimmon. These were the first relaxed steps they had taken in a long time. Thora and Bull had maneuvered themselves to Rhodan’s sides, and Tschubai helped Chaktor to organize the transport of Lossoshér.

“Our friend Chaktor takes much better care of unconscious Lossoshér than conscious Lossoshér does,” commented Bull.

Rhodan did not answer. He was trying to memorize their route. The first buildings they passed were made of wood. They seemed to come from one of the first construction phases of the island. On some of them there were signs. Thora looked at them curiously, but the characters were strange.

“Unfortunately, the translator can’t handle written language,” Rhodan said.

“I know,” Thora replied a little arrogantly. “The letters seem to be Ferron, Rhodan.”

“You’re right. But the whole thing looks like a museum.”

“Welcome to Kimmon, the greatest amusement park in the wonderful blue ocean of Reyan!” Bull couldn’t help but add a biting comment to everything.

“Does that remind you of anything, Reg?”

Bull thought for a moment. “At best, it reminds me of one of those films from the last century. *Blue Hawaii* and similar musicals where happy fishermen go out to return home after a day at sea, tanned and singing.”

“Sure, from the last century. Reg, do you have any idea *when* we are?”

Bull looked at him, confused. “Right. There was something...”

The environment through which they were being guided changed. They climbed a few steps and left behind the museum area, as Rhodan had named it, the picturesque houses, the suspended nets, and the Reyaners, who were repairing equipment or cleaning fish without any haste.

Rhodan knew all too well the physical movement required to step into a transmitter to overcome an unknown distance. But there was also a mental threshold to overcome. They entrusted themselves to a foreign technology in order to get to another place or, as they’d had to learn, to another time. Here, it was a step on a path through a village that, at least at first glance, looked Earthly. But if you left it behind, in the next instant you were in an environment that seemed highly technological. It was like walking from one set to another in a film studio. But here there were two worlds that existed side by side while belonging to each other.

Rhodan found himself in the midst of a hectic scene. The first display they passed showed three-dimensional figures spinning in a kind of shop window. He gave them a curious look. The figures changed every five to six seconds, all of them naked, but—as he was surprised to discover—genderless. For this purpose, certain parts of the body were highlighted in red. Once it was gills that

were marked, then webbed skins between toes and fingers.

Does our guide also have webbed toes?

Then came the figures with the oversized upper bodies for increased lung capacity, but also individual limbs with strengthened muscles and bones. Some figures looked more like mermaids, with a single tail-like appendage instead of legs.

He was unable to satisfy his curiosity as Thiroki continued to lead them to their destination. Rhodan turned to Thora: “Is this on the level of Arkonide technology?”

“I...don’t know. I’m not a doctor.” She was silent for a moment. “But what I see here in bio-technology is *high-tech*, as you would say. No other developments seem to have progressed that far. Propulsion technology, planet shaping, and so on. But the Ferrons have managed to develop this one area very far.”

“Their environment forces them to do so. If they really want to become Reyaners, they have to adapt to the planet as much as possible.”

They continued on their way. Some stores seemed to offer genetically modified food that was only suitable for certain adapted digestive systems. There were always residential buildings between the laboratories and clinics, but there was no planning, no recognizable pattern. This city had grown piece by piece in a short time, without an urban planner being involved.

Rhodan was so distracted by the displays that he nearly ran into Bull. Their group had stopped.

Thiroki turned to them. “I promised that you would be our guests. I hope Jebesh will abide by this agreement. It would be best if we provided you with a guard of honor. I don’t think Jebesh would dare to do anything about you on Kimmon, but you never know.”

Rhodan studied the building in front of them. It looked like an office building, devoid of any decoration, yet ergonomic so that as

much space could be used as efficiently as possible within the floorplan. He cocked his head,counting ten floors, certainly including an apartment with a veranda on the top floor, which was hard to see because of the unfavorable angle.

Rhodan turned to Thiroki. “We thank you for your hospitality. And of course we are happy about the offer of a guard of honor. We still have many questions that we would like to ask you. But at the moment, it’s probably best if we get the opportunity to freshen up a bit and take care of our injuries.”

Thiroki smiled. “You are all still wet and full of salt. We will look at what clothes we can offer so that you have something until your belongings are cleaned. And surely we will find a way to plug the worst holes.” She looked skeptically at the torn clothes of the group. “Follow me.”

6.

Venus

Venus Refuge, October 5, 2036

Manoli was still overwhelmed. *We just wanted to go to the Moon...*

Venus did not look at all like a celestial body named after a goddess of love. It was a white ball. *The morning star of mythology. A fitting sign for a departure to the stars.*

Manoli's thoughts were interrupted by Aescunnar. "Doctor Manoli, I'm very grateful to you for this opportunity."

"What opportunity? The one to talk to me or the one to fly to Venus?"

Manoli was enjoying the banter with Aescunnar. He had already come to know the historian from his publications as an unconventional thinker. In conversation, the historian was almost even more entertaining. He could mentally twist and turn an object until he had looked at it from many angles that no other person would have even thought of.

Following more of a gut feeling rather than any logical conclusion, Manoli had asked the historian to accompany him on further investigations. Unfortunately, both had made the mistake of telling this to a few people. And a certain telepathically gifted fur creature had probably read the same information from one of their minds...and immediately invited himself on board.

"What is our telepathic friend up to?" Aescunnar was probably stuck on the same thought he was.

"His mutant highness is asleep."

"Good."

The two men had spent the last two hours trying to come up

with new names for Gucky. Previously, they had spent an hour devising new mutant abilities, and before that, for a few hours, they had ineffectually discussed the question of what to name the political system of a united solar system, with Manoli's proposal of the "United Federation of Planets" narrowly losing to Aescunnar's "Galactic Empire."

"Tell me," Aescunnar began, "do you trust Gucky?"

Manoli thought for a moment. "Yes. Why?"

His companion also thought for a moment. "I don't know. I have a...feeling. I think Gucky is lying. He's hiding something from us."

Manoli didn't know what to say.

"Oh, never mind," Aescunnar replied. "I'll just keep a close eye on him."

"Good."

Aescunnar was silent. Manoli looked at the *Aetron* holo. *It's amazing—all my life, I have longed to fly to the stars. And now I'm finally here, joking with a historian instead of reverently staring at creation!*

Manoli felt Aescunnar's eyes on him.

"Do you feel the same way, Manoli?" the historian asked. "Stupidity distracts from oneself asking the questions that befall us out here: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?"

"You're right, Aescunnar. But who could have known that a death would provide an opportunity to fly to Venus?"

"If an Arkonide dies in the solar system, someone should represent Rhodan on the ground."

Manoli sighed. "I didn't fly to the Moon to work as a deputy statesman. And I'd rather Perry be here himself."

“Do you think I became a historian to attend funerals?” countered Aescunnar. “And far as Perry Rhodan is concerned, there are many people who worry that the progress of a united humanity depends on him personally.”

“You’re right,” Manoli admitted.

“And Gucky? Why is he coming?”

“I don’t know.” Manoli shrugged. “It’s hard for me to understand. And he hasn’t really allowed me to examine him so far.”

“Well, you’re a doctor, and not everyone likes doctors. But I think as a human being, Gucky likes you!”

“Great. Next time I’d like to have a long-legged, blonde, female mutant follow me everywhere,” Manoli said with a smile.

Wuriu Sengu focused on the wall. His gaze penetrated the wall, the rock, but there was nothing. No cavity, nothing. Exhausted, he broke off his gaze. Ariane Colas let go of his sweaty hand.

“Wuriu, how many more walls?”

The mutant had to think for a moment. “According to my last count: seventeen. Then we’ll be through with this department.”

The young mutant sighed. “Seventeen. That doesn’t sound good.”

Wuriu looked at her apologetically, “I’m sorry. I suspect it’s worse for you than it is for me. I can at least see something when I’m connected to you. You have to walk room by room and silently watch me staring at walls.”

Ariane laughed. “No, Wuriu, it’s not like that. The mental block changes my perception, just as it changes yours. I give you energy, but you also give me some.” She thought for a moment, as if she had to find the right words. “Of course, it’s not as impressive when you can change smells. But I also find peace in the mental block, to feel *into* my gift. And then what I perceive changes.” She made a

sweeping motion with her arms. “All this, it changes its smell when I’m connected to you.”

Wuriu looked at the mutant. *She’s not my type, but she is pretty. A little too lush for my taste, a little too much make-up, but that’s a matter of taste. And her eyelashes…she has a way of getting made up that is interesting. And it really doesn’t look that bad.*

“Hey, Wuriu, be careful. I think that I’m unconsciously using my gifts. You’re just falling for my scent.” She snapped her fingers as if to wake him from a trance. “Earth to Wuriu, wake up.”

Wuriu looked at her again with clear eyes. “It should be ‘Venus to Wuriu’,” he remarked. “Thank you.” He stumbled. “And sorry, I was just a little…distracted.”

“My gift sometimes has that side effect. It’s not always pleasant to know that men only find you interesting because of my gift.” She sighed. “But let’s keep going — otherwise we’ll never make the seventeen walls today.”

Wuriu was grateful that she had changed the subject. He looked at his pad. “That way, to the next room.” He went on.

Ariane followed him. “Everything would be easier if the positronics were a little more cooperative.”

“Well, we now have a Venus station with a regular human crew. And the station provides us with air, food, and even data.”

“But that’s about it,” Ariane said. “The positronics have helped us get this far, but then not a step further.”

Wuriu stopped and turned to his companion. “Ariane, on Earth, it worked. We found the secret access to a hidden area next to the underwater dome. But that doesn’t mean it’ll be just as easy here.”

Ariane scratched her ear. “Yes, you’re right. But of course I can’t help hoping it’ll be just as easy.”

Wuriu resumed walking. Again, she followed.

“You know, Ariane, Manoli is on his way to Venus. He’s bringing Gucky with him. Between us, we should be able to form a stronger link.”

“Great!” commented Ariane ironically. “Then we can finally look deeper into boring Venusian rock.”

Little was known to humans about Arkonide funeral rites. And the positronics of the station were unsuitable as a source for such topics. In the end, it was Aescunnar who had proposed not to bury Tamika, but to send her body into the sun.

“She came so far only to die of serious injuries in our solar system,” his statement had begun. “The only thing that can reach her homeworld is the light of our sun. Let’s make sure she becomes a part of it.”

So it happened that Manoli had stood at a desk in his good suit and looked down at a projectile containing Tamika’s body. The young Arkonide had belonged to the crew of the *Aetron*, which had been stranded on the moon. While Manoli had fought for Crest’s life on Earth, Thora had set out with Tamika on a reconnaissance flight through the solar system. The flight had been superfluous from an objective point of view, but the commander had had to leave the constraints of the ship behind.

Tamika had impulsively accompanied Thora, as had the half-Arkonide, Quiniu Soptor. Above Venus, the two reconnaissance craft had taken fire in the belief that they were enemies. Quiniu Soptor had been able to escape while Thora and Tamika had been shot down. The two women had managed to enter the refuge where the shelter’s combat robots attacked them.

The robot Rico had stopped firing at the last moment. Or rather, at the last moment for Thora. Tamika had already been seriously injured. For weeks, the Arkonide had been fighting for her life.

Eventually, Tamika had succumbed to her injuries. For a doctor, this was always a dreaded moment. A patient had been stabilized to the point where they had survived the injury, but hours or days

later, still died as a result. Manoli felt compassion for his colleagues who had looked after Tamika.

He glanced to the right. There stood Aescunnar, also in a black suit. In addition, Gucky and the two mutants, Wuriu and Ariane, were present. He took a deep breath. The nausea had returned. *Is this just nerves because I have to speak in front of a crowd? Or is it because I have to give a eulogy? Or am I…sick?* He tensed up. Manoli knew that his words, like the whole ceremony, were being transmitted to Earth. Such moments always made him nervous. *Actually, Perry should be standing here.*

He cleared his throat. "I was expecting a lot of things when I flew to the moon. But I didn't expect to stand on Venus one day to hold a eulogy for an alien. I know little about Tamika. I don't even know her last name. But I know that she entered our solar system on the *Aetron*. That she was one of the few lucky Arkonides who survived the destruction of the spaceship. And that her fate is intertwined with that of the human race."

He looked at the bystanders. "We could have been deterred by her strangeness; she could have been repelled by our primitiveness. But there seems to be a spark burning in all of us that provides us with a certain basic trust in our fellow creatures. She recognized something in us; we recognized something in her. And that *something* was more unifying than anything that separated us."

He paused. "Despite the advanced level of Arkonide technology, we were unable to save her. For me, as a doctor, this is a call for us to continue researching, searching, exploring further. As a human being, this means that no matter how advanced the technology, no matter how far we explore space…we will always dread death. But perhaps that is also a consolation at this hour. No matter what our technology, our culture, we have two things in common: we are born and we die."

For a moment, he thought of the irony of her death. Crest and Thora had come to their solar system in search of the Planet of Eternal Life. And this was where Tamika's life had ended.

"If it is no longer what we have in common with all cultures of

the Milky Way, it is still enough to create a mutual understanding. Tamika is proof of that." He paused for a moment. "To your last journey: all the best!"

At his gesture, the projectile lifted and floated to one of the locks of the dome. From there, it would be shipped to a reconnaissance craft that would put it on course for the Sun outside Venus's atmosphere.

Manoli stepped down from the podium, and he and Aescunnar walked through the hangar once again. Aescunnar had his hands folded behind his back, and Manoli was moving both hands as he spoke.

"It's crazy." Manoli was dissatisfied with the situation.

"The positronics?" asked Aescunnar.

"Oh, everything. The positronics are like a rubber wall. You can push them a little bit, then you are gently but most assuredly pushed back."

"No information about ships or other transmitters?"

"Nope," Manoli replied.

"And of course no information about the Arkonides' stay in our solar system." The historian was also visibly dissatisfied with what he had found out.

Manoli sighed. "We found historical artifacts from centuries ago in the underwater dome, but the positronics pretend to have no idea what they are or how they got there. The Arkonides have definitely been in the solar system for centuries, if not millennia, but the positronics supposedly recorded nothing, observed nothing."

"Yes, an absolute horror for historians," Aescunnar agreed. "You're sitting on a lot of objective, raw data. But, unfortunately, positronics simply aren't willing to sort things out. *No,* it even claims to have never recorded anything."

"Yes, and that's not all. An Arkonide ship enters our solar

system, gets stranded on the moon, and the crew stiffly and firmly claims that they have no idea that Arkonides have ever been in our solar system."

They had arrived at the end of the hangar. Manoli leaned briefly against the wall.

"Are you okay?" asked Aescunnar.

"Some nausea, nothing serious."

The historian examined the doctor. "You look tired."

"The last few days have been...exhausting." He took a few calming breaths, then playfully wiggled his fingers to eliminate the tingling sensation as if they had fallen asleep. He straightened up again. "Let's keep going."

They made a quarter turn to the right and continued along the next outer wall.

"I feel like I'm in a 19th century thriller novel—we're counting our steps so that we can find out if there's a secret space not shown on the map."

Manoli laughed. "Aescunnar, you are great. No, we're walking here because we want to think, and a walk is often quite wonderful for the cerebrum."

"Have Gucky, Sengu, and Colas achieved anything?" Unlike Manoli, Aescunnar had no direct access to the three mutants' reports.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Absolutely nothing. There are a few places that seem suspicious to them, but whenever they look deeper, they only find Venus."

Manoli stopped. Aescunnar was no longer next to him. He had stopped three steps behind him and looked at Manoli as if he were a pickle.

"Are you okay?"

“We’re idiots!” replied the historian in a toneless voice.

“What?” Manoli was surprised by his companion’s odd behavior.

The other man made a sweeping movement with his arms. “What is this?”

“A hangar,” Manoli answered.

“And what belongs in a hangar?”

“Spaceships,” Manoli replied. “Do I get points for the correct answer?”

“Hey…Manoli! The hangar here is empty, as is the *Tosoma* hangar. But we know where an Arkonide spacecraft is: on Titan!”

Manoli hit his forehead with the palm of his hand. “The wreck that Julian Tifflor and his friends found! That’s right, I almost forgot.”

“Doctor Manoli…you wanted clues to other places where a transmitter might be located. Done. You’re welcome.” Aescunnar bowed theatrically.

7.

LL-308-P

Reyan

Sometime

The room was illuminated only by a large, colorful map projected onto one of the walls. The huge blue areas were the oceans of the planet. The small, scattered green spots were the islands. The brown rings and dots showed the atolls and marine mountains, whose peaks reached below or even to the surface of the water. Many of these brown markings were surrounded by orange circles.

Everywhere in the blue area were yellow squares. They marked the known positions of the rafts. The gray squares marked the oil rigs, breeding facilities, harvesting robots, mussel farms, the large mining facilities, and, of course, the parks with their hotels, restaurants, and leisure facilities.

The yellow and gray squares moved slowly on the map as the projection of the planet's surface darkened from the side.

Evening is coming. Teldara watched the patches of color. The gray squares formed a reasonable, controlled pattern. Some were grouped around the orange circles. There, the land reclamation projects defied the ocean with more islands. Gigantic excavators transported dirt from the seabed to the sea surface on long tracks in order to lift those areas that were only just below the surface above the water, forming more land. Further production facilities were to be built here. Every piece of soil had to be wrested from the water.

Ferrol was overpopulated. Only Reyan's regular deliveries kept the home planet alive. The well-being of all Ferrons was more important than the needs of some colonies. The boundaries of colonization had to be pushed further if Ferron civilization was not to stagnate. It was necessary to colonize new worlds. Only with ever

new sources of raw materials was it possible to prevent a standstill.

Many Ferrons were short-sighted when it came to the future. Of course, it was impressive to adapt the bodies of the colonists to the populated worlds. These investments only paid off in a few generations, but Ferrol needed investments that paid off *now*. And she was someone who always kept an eye on the overall conditions. Although the costs here were very high, the investments were worthwhile in the end. Teldara always assured herself in advance that her expenses were justified. Otherwise, she wouldn't have stayed in her position for so many years.

Her position allowed her to work undisturbed at her leisure. She suspected that there was hectic activity outside her office. "No, Teldara is unavailable at the moment... No, I can't put you through. Teldara is busy... Yes, I know who you are. And I believe you that it is important. But it is simply not possible to connect you now."

She laughed inwardly at the performance. At the moment, she was grateful for the silence and the colorful lights. Here, all the problems of supplies, deliveries and obligations, accounts and balances, were reduced to a few colorful lights on a map.

One of the yellow spots flashed. Then it changed its previous direction and approached one of the gray squares. She touched the umbrella at this point, marked a section that she wanted to have enlarged with her thumb and index fingers. The depiction changed slowly until she stopped the process with a snap of her fingers against the screen.

Now she could also read names at this point. *LL-308-P.* An important facility. Here, the Umbra that the fishermen delivered was crushed and flash-frozen. Then it was transported to Ferrol. From Umbra, drugs were obtained that could cure shaking fever and bong-bong. For some other diseases, the drugs had a calming effect without being able to eliminate the base illness itself. Ferron scientists hoped that the process would be so well unraveled in the next few years that Umbra could be synthetically reproduced and then modified in such a way that it worked on other diseases.

LL-308-P. The fishermen could never agree what they would do

with the Umbra. They took money and goods from the land dwellers, even accepting their help in individual cases. But woe, the land dwellers did something that contradicted their peculiar customs and laws. Then they were immediately ready to leave everything behind and rebel against them.

Tirkl spat unerringly into a small container on the corner of her desk. Her second husband had given her the container for her anniversary. It was a bronze shell held by a woman's hand. *Just as the company is in my hands*, she thought.

Once again the fish... The lousy scaly being had probably once again realized that Gu-Bi-Go-Ni, protector of the waves, was against the fact that Umbra was processed on the day of the great fish glow. Or a child with gills behind his ears had been born who had a birthmark on his butt that looked not unlike a Shetla. After this omen, certainly sent by the great mother of all Shetlas or the brother-in-law of all deceased Shetlas, it was of course impossible for the fishermen to continue to deliver Umbra to the land dwellers.

How she hated it. Reyan had to be subjected to the Ferrons. It was not the Ferrons who had to adapt to the planet, but the planet that had to adapt to them. Instead of remaining in self-imposed primitiveness like the fish, controlled by dogmas and outdated taboos, one should be aware of what it meant to be a Ferron. Ferrons did not alter their bodies to stay underwater longer, to use the tang as a food source, or to survive the poison of the trim-trab-tang more easily. You had to develop remedies for the diseases, plant another tang, and build machines that could remain underwater for an endless period of time.

Teldara continued to watch as the LL-308-P raft approached. Suddenly, she straightened up. "Light!" The map faded as the lighting in the room rose to daylight levels. "Communication!" Texts immediately flowed over her display. Various calls, some electronic messages, mostly reports and statements about planned or started projects.

It activated the connection to her secretary. Immediately, she heard the busy tapping of shoes, the clacking of input devices of all kinds, and muffled noise.

“Kleckr, open a connection to LL-308-P. Then I’ll take care of the other tasks. Please sort according to urgency. Thank you!” She removed her fingers from the plate, after which the connection broke off. She didn’t have to wait long.

“The connection to LL-308-P is active.”

“Thank you!” She waited a moment until she was connected to the engineer in charge at the plant. “A raft of damned fish is approaching you,” she said.

“Right. They will swim around a little bit in our way again to slow us down.”

“Is there any danger to LL-308-P?”

The engineer on the other end laughed. “No, certainly not.”

“Then why did you back off when the rafts approached?” She was surprised by how little her contact at the other end kept an eye on the cost of such a maneuver.

For a moment, there was stunned silence. “In order to not endanger the fishermen...”

She took a deep breath. “Listen to me carefully. It is not our problem when fishermen put themselves in danger. We have quotas to meet, nothing else. Let them know that you don’t plan to change course. You have a job to do. This must be done as quickly as possible. You won’t change course, understood?”

“But...”

“Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” came the reply.

“Good.” She terminated the connection. “Good,” she added once again only to herself. “Everything will be fine.”

8.

An Island with Two Mountains

Reyan

Sometime

The woman who smiled at her from the mirror did not seem to feel comfortable in her environment. Her clothes were good, blue and green tones, plus a red scarf. Not a risky decision for a middle-aged woman, but the shades were too harmoniously selected for her dark blue skin color.

She wasn't wearing a suit, but her clothes were neat without looking too formal. Her hands were the hands of a woman who was used to manual labor, but her nails were still well-groomed. She wasn't wearing any jewelry on her fingers, but a valuable Smulli was attached to her scarf by a needle. These rare shells had a phosphorescent pattern that emitted a peculiar light at dusk.

But the woman who smiled at her was still nervous.

Alrad activated the window so that it transformed from a reflective surface into a real window. *How long do I have to wait for my appointment?* She knew that this was part of the psychological game that people liked to play with the fish here. But she had decided not to let her unease show.

She let her gaze wander over the island. She knew Rey from many previous visits. The question of the first landing was a question of faith among the Ferrons on Reyan. The fish swore sacred oaths that the settlement of their world had begun on Kimmon. The mud creepers, on the other hand, certainly still had the old logbook with which they could prove that the first ship with colonists from Ferrol had landed on Rey.

The old dispute between the two groups had begun around the same time. Since then, both sides had believed that this planet

belonged to them—and to them alone.

Rey wasn't big. At its longest and widest, the island measured ten kilometers long and ten kilometers wide. But since it was not shaped like a square, more like an intertwined knot, its original area was given as about fifty square kilometers.

In the meantime, the size of the island had more than tripled. The rural dwellers had begun early on to fill in the coastlines. Meanwhile, there was no piece of the original coast of Rey that was still on the water. Land had been reclaimed everywhere. And the land was immediately cultivated.

Rey had therefore developed into a patchwork of residential districts, factories, and transport routes. From the beginning, passenger traffic on Rey had been regulated by a network of public transport stations, as the island was too small to allow for extensive road construction for private transport. Goods and bulky goods were either transported by air or delivered to the island by ship. Everywhere on the coast there were jetties, in addition to the large harbor in the west.

From the main island of Rey, a large, drop-like strip stretched to the west. Here, the land reclamation had been specifically carried out so that a large port for the maritime interests of the settlers could be built somewhat outside the actual settlement. Later, this area had been enlarged to make room for an airport and later for a real spaceport.

Like her sister settlement, Kimmon, Rey was not a day older than four hundred years. After all, it was agreed that the landing of the two ships had taken place in the same year. That was also the only thing they could agree on.*No, we even agree on the name of the planet*, she added in her thoughts.

Alrad still believed that Kimmon had taken a natural evolution while Rey had turned into a juggernaut. A land-eating juggernaut that gradually turned the water into land.

Of course, the city was also a marvel of Ferron determination and engineering, but it showed in her opinion that will was nothing

if it was not guided by ethics.

Alrad turned around when she heard a door open behind her.

“Superior Alrad, the governor wishes to see you.”

Alrad was surprised. For the governor, such a short wait was an incredible concession to the fish...

The last few times she had entered the governor’s study, he had only turned his back to her. With his hands folded behind him, he had stood by the window and acted as if he had no time for the Superior. Now he was standing behind his desk, smiling, before approaching the Superior, shaking her hand and offering her something to drink. She gratefully declined.

“I hope you had a good trip.”

Alrad looked into the governor’s face. “Flark, I don’t understand you. You don’t seem sick or confused, there’s no media crew for some Ferron station in the office that could record this conversation for a campaign. What’s wrong with you that you’re being so friendly to me?”

Flark smiled cautiously. “Well, then let’s skip this part. I thought it might make sense to ease the tension between us a little before discussing more serious affairs.”

“Tension? Governor, do you really think that the ongoing attacks by the land dwellers on the fish only cause *tension*? Every day, I have to explain to young people that they should not use harpoons on the excavator operators. And you’re talking about tension?”

Despite her outburst, Flark remained quietly seated in his armchair. “Superior, as sorry as I am, I don’t think that’s our main problem.”

For a moment, Alrad was speechless. Then it burst out of her like a waterfall. “You don’t think that the destruction of our culture is the main problem? Would you prefer hordes of young fish to act violently against what they see as an intrusion into their sphere of life?”

Flark raised his hands reassuringly. “I didn’t mean it that way. But I have reason to believe that we have worse problems on Reyan than disputes between the two settler groups.”

Alrad sank back into her seat. “Do tell.”

“I would like to show you something before we continue.”

“Okay.”

The governor changed some settings until the room lighting was pleasantly dimmed. The window darkened itself with a smoky tint until the light seeping in did little to illuminate the room.

The governor stepped up next to Alrad. With a remote control, he activated the projection on the opposite wall.

Alrad and Flark had silently watched the approximately fifteen-minute presentation.

“Now I need a drink.” The Superior was shocked by what she had just seen. In the beginning, she had listened skeptically as land dwellers’ specialists described in detail what violations of the airspace over the areas of the fish had actually been caused by their aircraft, and what interventions in the foreign airspace were obviously committed by Ferrol units.

She had remained skeptical until she was finally allowed to watch a huge cobalt blue cylinder fly over the sky of Reyan. No one had seen this ship over Reyan until now, and it could not have come from the land dwellers. It was impossible to hide such a colossus on Reyan. And who would be interested in testing their strength? Not even the central government on Ferrol would have a reason to choose Reyan, of all places, for such a test. There were stronger colonies, so something like that made no sense. Questions upon questions.

“Superior Alrad, I know it’s all hard to believe,” Flark said. “But part of the dispute between us isn’t because we’re violating your boundaries or you’re sabotaging our machines. Apparently, there is

another power in the background that has been manipulating us for years, making sure that we do not agree. As long as we argue with each other, we will not rebel against Ferrol together. I have had some information prepared for you."

He went over to his desk, picked up a folder and brought it to the Superior. "We can't prove everything and we can't solve every incident. Surely there are indeed saboteurs in your ranks and aggressors in our ranks. But it is the central Ferrol government that has the greatest interest in separating us. For decades, the deliveries we receive from Ferrol have been getting smaller and smaller. Under the pretext that we have to learn our independence, we pay more for fewer goods. On the other hand, the cost of transport is rising because the space flight to Ferrol is in the hands of the central government. We rent pitches at Ferrol's spaceports while their ships are allowed to land on Rey for free. Prices for our exports are falling. And every time we can't deliver due to an attack by the fish—no, I have to correct myself: an *alleged* attack by the fish—causes our production to stall, we pay horrendous default fees to Ferrol."

He raised both hands.

"I can't keep my people calm for much longer. The tension is too great. I don't want it to erupt between your people and mine. But I also don't want it to discharge towards Ferrol. At least not until we know how strong Ferrol actually is. Until last week, we were sure that we could estimate Ferrol's strength, and then we saw this cylinder."

He took a seat behind his desk.

"Superior, please, take a look at the documents, and ask me anything you would like to ask me. I will try to answer your questions comprehensively. And then we should think about how to proceed...and whether there *is a we* for a common approach at all."

Flark reactivated the lights so that the Superior could read in peace. Then he leaned back, turning his chair towards the window. He looked out at Rey while Alrad worked through the documents.

Alrad sat in silence. The computer was lying on her knees with a black screen. Her hands were crossed, her feet positioned parallel on the ground. Her body didn't give away the turmoil inside her. She cleared her throat.

Flark immediately turned to her. "Yes?"

She pointed at the computer. "If only half of what's on there is true, we have been controlled by Ferrol in our dislikes and sympathies for many years, if not decades. Ferrol's continuing influence over literature—no, over the media—serves to portray the central world as a clay colossus that never intends to pursue its interests militarily, even if necessary. And in the background, Ferrol has been investing heavily in its military, correct?"

"Superior Alrad, that is what the documents suggest."

"Why would the central government do such a thing?"

Flark thought for a moment. "A military is costly. Ferrol could equip its military even more, that's clear. But *subtle* influence is cheaper than maintaining a large fleet. So the central government probably chooses a path in between. Rearmament, yes, but in addition to comprehensive propaganda to conceal what's happening behind the scenes."

"And if all this is fake?"

He sighed. "Then a Ferron group tries to prove with the help of a forgery that another Ferron group has been trying to prove something else with the help of a fake for years. Alrad, don't get me wrong. I am not asking you to take everything in those documents at face value. But I want you to get all the documents I can obtain and talk with your advisors about how to proceed with Reyan as a planet."

"Conditions?"

"No conditions, Superior, just a reference to two self-evident

things. First, I want as few people as possible to know about these documents. For the moment, at least. I want to protect my sources for understandable reasons. Secondly, I would ask that both of us keep the attacks in check as much as possible until the situation is resolved. Are these acceptable conditions?"

Alrad didn't have to think twice. "I agree. But I want to know what the plan is before I talk to my people. I know you. You have a plan. Otherwise, you wouldn't have told me so much. If you want me to help you, you have to tell me everything."

The governor looked at her in surprise. He drummed his fingers on the top of his desk and hummed a little.

"Good," He blurted out. "I have to trust you. You already know enough to completely discredit me if you secretly worked for Ferrol." He paused for effect, as if hoping Alrad would prove to be a Ferron agent. But she said nothing. Then Alrad spoke up. "So, you know that we handle all of the planet's space trade through Rey. Of course, this gives us the opportunity to get in touch with astronauts from the other colonies. Over the years, a...sort of network...has developed. I am in contact with the other colonies. Rofus, the moons...we all share the same experiences with Ferrol. We managed to arrange a meeting with representatives of the other colonies. That's why it's so important for Reyan to speak with one voice."

"With your voice?" Alrad interjected mockingly.

"Not necessarily. It may also be your voice." He looked directly into the Superior's eyes. She did not avoid his gaze. "It's about more than just a quarrel between land dwellers and fish, between Reyan and Ferrol. It is important that we set the course for development in the coming decades. We are not yet ready for a rebellion. But we believe that we have a chance to enforce our demands against Ferrol if we act as one."

"Rebellion is a strong word. When will this meeting take place?"

"That's exactly my problem: next week." Alrad wanted to interrupt him, but he continued to speak. "No, I told you as early as I could. But understandably, we must seize every opportunity to

meet without Ferrol knowing about it. The date next week is a gift of chance. It would be a mistake not to attend."

"But what should we fish contribute to this? The spaceport, the trade...all this is under the control of the land dwellers."

"Bio-technology. No one is as advanced in it as you are. Stop wasting your opportunities on turning Ferrons into fish. Put your skills at the service of the struggle for the freedom of the colonies!"

"You want us to fight? Fight for Rey?"

"No, I don't. I don't want you to fight for Rey. You should fight for Reyan!"

"Governor, this is a decision I can't make alone."

"I fully understand that. Get your people's approval. We are counting on you!"

9.

Three in Space Alone

In the Solar System

October 6, 2036

"And who's supposed to believe that?" Aescunnar broke his gaze from the Holo.

"Where are you right now?" asked Manoli.

"I'm done."

"You're a fast reader."

"One of the advantages of being a historian."

Aescunnar leaned back. He let his gaze wander. Gucky was sitting silently in the cockpit's third seat. His eyes were closed. Earlier, he had complained of fatigue, but when Manoli had offered to examine him, Gucky had kindly but firmly declined.

Manoli was silent again. Apparently, he was busy soaking up the view...which was understandable. In front of them stretched wide-open space.

We humans have come a long way in recent months, Aescunnar thought. *The history of mankind—would one ever have expected that it would take such an upward development in a few months? Or are all the things we've created over the last millennia just steps on a path that took us out into space?*

Still, the view was truly stunning. The blackness was repeatedly interrupted by individual points of light: suns, planets, all sorts of things. The historian had to look at the Holo and read the names if he wanted to identify the points of light more closely.

This ship...is a dream. If I pinch myself, I'll probably wake up and

find myself sitting in the reading room at some university library in Europe. Instead…a technology that we use but don't actually understand. Holos wherever you look. Rapid data evaluation. And spaceships that survive centuries—no, millennia, and travel light years…

Aescunnar brought himself back to reality. Next to him sat Manoli, who looked over at him curiously.

"So, what is it that someone's supposed to believe?"

Over the last few days, a bond of mutual appreciation, almost friendship, had formed between the two. Nevertheless, they stuck to the formal speech. Aescunnar did not know exactly why. Perhaps to distance himself from Gucky, who mercilessly treated everyone and everything he encountered as a buddy.

"Manoli, these records are hard to believe."

"But it's still an official report."

Gucky seemed to have awoken. "What report?"

"Gucky, he's talking about the report of the first trip to Titan," Manoli replied.

"And what's not to believe in it?" If there was one thing that distinguished Gucky, it was his boundless curiosity.

"The whole story is totally implausible," Aescunnar replied. "Three young people—Tifflor, Orsons, and Harnahan—are given permission to launch one of the few spaceworthy ships in existence. Let's just ignore the fact that this in itself is unbelievable enough. Then they make it into space without training and without any experience. They even reach Titan without anything catastrophic on the way."

"Well," said Manoli, "but is there any historical precedent?"

"What?" The historian felt his professional honor had been offended.

Manoli smiled. "Odysseus. The Argonauts."

Aescunnar smiled at the doctor's comment. "Thank you! I didn't mean that. Those are *legends*."

"Tifflor isn't?" countered Manoli.

Aescunnar laughed. "No, not yet. In ten centuries, perhaps. Even so, I could have believed this part, but from then on it will be real science fiction."

"You mean, like the thesis that we could meet extraterrestrial creatures on the Moon?"

Manoli liked to tease. But Aescunnar knew that the physician was basically a nice person.

"No, I don't mean that. So the three make it to Titan. We ignore the fact that the flight and landing were masterpieces. No one has ever flown through Titan's atmosphere. But it gets better: they actually find the Arkonide ship, the IGITA. And what's on board? A sphere that has telepathic abilities."

"I'm not fat," Gucky chirped tiredly.

"For once, we didn't mean you." Manoli leaned over to Gucky, who had sounded quite strained.

"So..." Aescunnar returned to the conversation. "On board, they encounter a sphere that reads their thoughts and calls itself *Harno*. And coincidentally, one of the three is called Harnahan."

"That's right, that part of the story really is a little weak."

The historian continued, "And Harno lives from 'the light of the stars' and asks to be brought close to the sun so as not to starve. So our three heroes transport him to the sun without any discussion. There, the sphere sucks itself full of starlight, absorbs Harnahan and gives humanity the access code to the *Tosoma*. Who could possibly believe that?"

Manoli looked at him skeptically. "So what do you think?"

"Scientifically, this is a catastrophe, not to be believed at all. But

since we have learned in recent months that there are people with extraordinary talents, I would suspect the following: Harnahan was a mutant, and a very powerful one at that. His subconscious created an external simulation of his powers, which he called Harno. He had read the access codes from the machine consciousness on Earth, but his powers only became apparent in space. This is the only way to explain why the flight was successful and how they were allowed to take off at all, and the rest of the story took place only in the imagination of the other two." Triumphantly, the historian leaned back.

"There are no audio recordings of Harno, no pictures of him." Manoli closed his eyes for a moment. "Your story is good, but it has a catch."

"It's badly told," Gucky interrupted again.

"Thank you; that wasn't necessary," Manoli replied.

"Pfffftt," commented Gucky.

"The hook," Manoli continued, "is the return of Tifflor and Orsons to Earth. If Harnahan was the super mutant who could fly the ship, how did the other two manage to return without him?"

"I don't know," Aescunnar replied.

"But I have to give it to them—it's a good story!" Manoli laughed softly. "I hope you don't think I'm a secret super mutant who can steer this ship just because of that?" he asked mockingly.

"No. You have solid education and training on your side."

"Yes. But I never expected to be able to fly something like this." Manoli stretched out his hand and patted the console in front of him. "In my training, I had to deal with everything that humans have ever brought into orbit and then into space. I know the name of every Russian or American astronaut of the early years. All those moments full of triumph and tragedy. How many people had to die to take us to the Moon? But we have managed to reach the Earthly Trabant on our own. Aescunnar, our Earthly spaceships are

technology." He made a sweeping gesture to include the whole room. "This is magic."

"Nevertheless, you do quite well as a magician."

Manoli laughed. "Once you understand the basics, it's not that difficult. The Arkonides must have had thousands of years of experience with this technology. Everything is...foolproof." He smiled mischievously.

"Does that mean that even idiots like us Earth humans can fly such a ship?" Before Manoli could comment, Aescunnar added: "I can reassure you, the word idiot comes from Greek; it means private person."

"Just got lucky again," Manoli scoffed. "I was about to strand you on Titan."

"Thank you!"

"I can still change my mind; we're not there yet. But soon." Manoli turned to Gucky. "We are approaching Titan's orbit. I don't know what the landing will be like, but it would be better if you were awake. And we should put on our combat suits. We don't know what to expect."

Gucky yawned and rubbed his eyes with his paws. "I don't understand. I'm so tired."

"I know the feeling," Manoli said.

Aescunnar looked over at him worriedly. Manoli seemed to have caught this view.

"Don't worry, I'm fine. I'm a doctor. I have tested my heart and kidneys several times. It's just strange...fatigue and nausea."

"A lot has happened over the last few days..." said Aescunnar.

Manoli did not elaborate on the subject. One by one, all three put on their combat suits.

Aescunnar's gaze rested on the displays again. In front of them was Titan. This time, he didn't need any explanatory data from the holo to see the moon. Titan looked like an egg-colored ball. His holo showed him all important data on Saturn VI—the distance from the sun, its orbital inclination, orbital period...and other things that he could only place after thinking about them for some time, such as Albedo and Sidereal Rotation.

Aescunnar was torn away from studying the data by Manoli's voice.

"I'm going into orbit."

The doctor now seemed like a completely professional astronaut. Nothing reminded them that he had actually been trained to fly spaceships only as far as Earth's nearby Moon. He was completely in his element. Titan spun away beneath them as he sheared into orbit.

"What are you up to?" asked Aescunnar.

"I want to try to land as close as possible to where Tifflor found the wreck." The doctor turned back to the control of the reconnaissance craft.

They circumnavigated the moon halfway before Manoli reached the point to initiate a landing maneuver. The tip of the spacecraft tilted forward. Titan filled the whole holo now.

Suddenly, the spaceship shook violently. Aescunnar was thrown from his seat and landed ungracefully. Gucky had intercepted his fall with his mutant gifts and was now sitting, strained and clutching the seat with both paws. Manoli was busy working feverishly at the controls.

"What's going on?" asked Aescunnar.

"I don't know," Manoli replied. "I no longer have control over the ship's systems... I'm trying to prevent a crash!"

10.

Under the Stars of Reyan

Reyan

Sometime

It became cool in the evening. Rhodan had chosen a cloak from the Ferron garments that had been left to them until they had cleaned and repaired their own belongings. It was a little reminiscent of a poncho. Now he stood at the edge of the balustrade, which formed the end of the top floor.

He was right in his assessment: the top floor of the building really was an apartment with a large roof garden. It probably usually accommodated more important guests than them, but the apartment was empty, so that's where they'd been brought. And, of course, security played a role. Up here, they were only vulnerable from the air and could only disappear through the air. Since the Ferrons knew nothing of Tschubai's abilities, they had to assume that the guests here were safe and had no way to escape.

Bull quietly stepped over to him.

"Awake again?" asked Rhodan.

His friend suppressed a yawn. "I don't know. I feel so…weak."

Rhodan looked at him worriedly, so Bull changed the subject.

"What are you looking for, Perry? Familiar constellations?"

"That too. But I had hoped I could use the displacement of the constellations to calculate *when* we are."

"A good idea. But unrealistic, right?"

"Yes, unrealistic. I have no experience with the changed conditions of observation from another solar system. Nor do I have

any instruments." He sighed. "But even if I knew all this, I wouldn't have any comparative data. Who expects that one day they'll have to know how much the stars in the Big Dipper shifted over the millennia so that he can calculate what part of the past they are currently in? Time travel..."

"It's better to do anything at all than sit around inside."

"That's right, Reg. But I have no idea what to tell the authorities when someone asks us how we got to Reyan."

"The truth," Bull suggested with a cunning wink.

"Hardly. What should I say? For example: we're time travelers from three different solar systems who got lost in the Vega system. No, I think I'm going to tell them something that explains our appearance. We come from different colonies. We rebelled against the central government and were therefore all captured. Then we fled from a prisoner ship and ended up here in the ocean."

"That doesn't sound very believable."

"It's much better than telling the truth, isn't it? And after the story, I can decide what to say when we've learned a little more about the situation here."

Bull was still skeptical. "I was hoping for a better story."

"If you can think of one, feel free to let me know. But until then...what are the others doing?"

"Unchanged. Tschubai is suggesting every half hour that he jump out to go exploring."

"Too dangerous. It wouldn't be difficult to trace him back to us. He stands out here."

"Sue Mirafiore took care of Lossoshér. Now she's asleep herself...as for the old Ferron. The local doctors have taken care of him. They say that he could wake up in ten seconds or ten days. It's too early to discuss the question of whether he needs to be artificially fed if he remains unconscious for a longer period of time.

So we can only wait with him through the night."

"Good. I was really worried about the old boy."

"Perry, you won't believe it, but even Chaktor is worried about Lossoshér."

Rhodan was silent. *We've all changed in the last few days. Under a different sun, in a different time…why shouldn't even Chaktor change?*

"Reg, it's interesting what's happening to us. And…what about Thora?"

"She's inspecting the building for the twenty-seventh time."

"What's her assessment?"

"Why don't you ask me yourself?" asked Thora a little mockingly from behind the two men.

Rhodan turned to her. Under the strange starry sky, dressed in Ferron clothing, she looked more human than ever. Rhodan caught himself staring at her curiously. *It doesn't look half bad on her.*

"How did you find us?" asked Bull.

Rhodan laughed. "Reg. The others are asleep, we're limited to one building. Then the two gentlemen stand by the railing and talk, illuminated by the night sky and city lights. I suppose it was very easy to find us."

"No, gentlemen, it really wasn't hard to find you here," Thora confirmed. "May I join in your conversation?"

"With pleasure," Rhodan agreed.

"So," Bull said, "now that Thora herself is here, tell us about the Ferrons' technology?"

"Difficult to assess," replied the Arkonide. "The general state of technology is higher than that of your Earthly culture of the present. But the Ferrons have apparently never made any progress

with their spaceships outside their own system."

"Neither have we," Rhodan reminded her.

"I know. But you people have...concepts...for superfast space travel. The Ferrons have other ideas about the direction in which their technology is developing. Their mining and conveying facilities are, as far as I can observe from here, modern. But in one area, they are much more advanced than one might expect from the rest of their technology: biotechnology. They seem to have adapted to the planet's food—all of them. That's why Reyan food tastes different from what we're used to from Ferrons so far."

"I tried the algae cookies," commented Bull, "and can only agree with Thora. Re-puls-ive."

"Thank you for your highly scientific input."

Rhodan tried to steer the conversation back in a reasonable direction. "Thora, continue. What age are we in?"

"Shouldn't we ask our Ferron expert?"

"Lossoshér is still unconscious."

"I know," Rhodan replied. "But Chaktor should know more about his homeland than any of us."

"I'll go get him," Bull said.

"But don't wake up the others," Rhodan warned him. "They may need the rest."

"Who doesn't? I'll be quiet." With those words, Bull disappeared inside.

"Pffft." Thora didn't seem to believe that Bull wouldn't wake everyone up when he entered the living room. But there was no noise from inside until he reappeared a little later with Chaktor.

Rhodan briefly brought Chaktor up to speed on their conversation.

“I also thought about what era we are in,” said the Ferron. “I am not an expert in Ferron history, but this Reyan does not fit the Reyan of my present. Besides, we would have been treated differently if your role were known, Lightbringer.”

“Chaktor, I’m not sure if this is...”

“Nonsense!” Bull interrupted. “It’s clear that we aren’t in our present. So it’s the past. What do you think, Chaktor? When in the past?”

The Ferron thought for a moment. “Certainly before the Dark Ages,” he replied hesitantly. “Because in the Dark Ages, they would have dealt swiftly with strangers like you. We are in the early stages of colonizing the system. Reyan is already inhabited, but...”

“Good,” Rhodan interrupted. “Is there a way to get more information?”

Chaktor looked skeptical. “I’ll go in again and see if I can find something that gives us a clue.” He turned to Bull. “I’ll be quiet...”

“What does that mean?” replied Bull, humming. “After all, I didn’t wake anyone up...”

Chaktor had already disappeared inside.

“And how do we get away from here?” asked Rhodan. “The easiest way is another transmitter. When Lossoshér is conscious again, we can ask him about transmitter locations on Reyan.”

“And then?” Bull objected. “A leap into the unknown? What’s in it for us? The next jump could take us to a much more dangerous place than this. And even if Lossoshér knows a transmitter location, how do we get off the island? At sea, the people of Reyan are far superior to us, and I haven’t seen any aircraft and certainly no spaceships.”

“And Crest,” Thora interjected. “We must not forget Crest. And his search. He was in search of life, but all we find is death. To me, all this seems a bit pointless...”

“Thora, none of what we do is pointless. We humans owe it to Crest. And as for the search for immortality, there are some loose ends. Also, what kind of strange ship was it in which we appeared? Who was the man calling himself Scout?”

And does it have anything to do with my vision of Gol, the divided planet? Something that should not exist. There is no room for half a planet in the universe...

“May I join you?” said another voice behind them.

Their heads turned in unison. It was Lossoshér who stood in the door frame on somewhat wobbly legs. He was finally awake.

Rhodan hurried over to him to escort the old Ferron forward. “We would be delighted,” he replied.

“Did Chaktor wake you up?” Bull couldn’t help himself.

“No. I was already awake,” replied the elderly Ferron. Actually, I wanted to get out, get a little fresh air. I couldn’t keep from overhearing your conversation.”

“It wasn’t a secret.”

“All right, Rhodan. Regarding Thora’s question as to whether this was pointless, I must strongly disagree. We met the first Thort. We were able to witness how the third eye was activated.”

“Yes, but wouldn’t everything have happened the same way without us?” Bull interjected.

“I doubt it. Who would have done it if Sue Mirafiore hadn’t been there? Who would have opened the third eye to Thort?” No one disagreed with his arguments. “We transmitter guards have many legends about the early days. I know them all: the *Book of the Great Struggle*, the *Book of the Great Light*, the *Book of the Great Harvest*, and so on. And I have the impression that without all of you, the story would not have come to pass. You were always part of the story that has now been fulfilled in you.”

“A scary notion,” Bull noted.

“Yes, and one in which the individual has no space.” Thora did not seem enthusiastic about the idea.

“No, Thora, we still have free will,” Rhodan vigorously disagreed. “We are thinking individuals with a free will. We’re not puppets playing through a story that’s set from the beginning. On the contrary, Ferron history only reflects what we have done in the past as our free will manifested. What was the past for some was still our own future.”

“Rhodan, you’re probably right, because—”

Lossoshér was interrupted by Chaktor, who was holding a thick book in his hand. “I looked around a little bit. And I found something. Look here, a kind of five-year plan for the further settlement of Reyan, including a date!”

“Show me!” Lossoshér stretched out his hand. Chaktor reluctantly gave him the book. Lossoshér opened it, flew over the first pages until he stopped in one spot. He gasped and read the page again. Then he went pale and stammered, “No, it can’t be!”

11.

Escape Without Chains

Reyan

Sometime

Alrad thoughtfully leaned against the railing of the catamaran. Time was of the essence. She would much rather have returned to Kimmon on one of her ships. But Flark had made it clear that they were running out of time.

She would have liked to enjoy the leisurely hours on board a fishing boat to prepare for the conversations that lay ahead. But the mud creepers' catamaran helped her gain valuable hours even though she knew it would give her people at home the wrong signal.

Somehow, all of a sudden, she couldn't think of the land dwellers as mud creepers. She had thought a lot in the few hours that had passed since her meeting. First, she had searched the files to find a gap, an error, some attempt at fraud. But deep down, she knew Flark had been telling the truth.

Kimmon could be seen on the horizon. At first, it was only the silhouette of the homeland that had lured her to the railing. Now, she recognized the settlement more clearly. She saw the jetties, some buildings. A homeland for which she had to make a decision.

What was her home? The fish on Reyan? Or a peculiar construct, a world full of Reyaners, in which both groups had to work together? Or was she simply a Ferron at heart, part of a culture that stretched across different planets and colonies? She didn't know. But she would have to find an answer before she spoke before the Council.

She stood silently at the railing as the ship approached the island. At the docks, she was able to spot some people waiting for

her: Thiroki and Jebesh. What did the soldier and fisherwoman want from her? And why were they waiting for her together? What had happened?

She left the ship as quickly as politeness allowed. As soon as she had stepped onto the dock, she was accosted by both of them.

“Alrad,” Jebesh made himself heard. “Superior! Something outrageous has happened. Thiroki picked up strangers in the sea and brought them to the settlement.”

“They are harmless!” Thiroki said to him. “And they are not strangers; they are my guests.”

“Pah! They should be expelled or killed immediately.”

“Jebesh!” Alrad admonished him. “That’s not our way of dealing with guests!”

Jebesh turned to the woman. “Guests? No! Spies, maybe.”

“What do you mean? That’s ridiculous!.”

Alrad stood between the two before they could turn their harsh words into blows. “Stop! This is certainly not the right place to discuss this.” She stole a telling look behind her at the *land dwellers’* catamaran. “You both won’t make a sound until we reach my office.”

“But—” Jebesh interjected.

“Not a sound!” she said to him.

“So, what happened?”

After their forced silence, words seemed to gush out of them like a waterfall. Loudly, they tried to tell the Superior their respective versions of the story.

“Stop! I can’t understand anything you’re saying!” Both stopped talking. “Who saw them first?”

Jebesh reluctantly pointed to Thiroki.

“Well, then I want to hear your part of the story first.”

Faltering at the start, then speaking more and more vividly, Thiroki told the story of how she had met her guests, brought them to Kimmon and accommodated them in the settlement. She did not spare the confrontation with Jebesh. He crossed his arms and turned away from her.

“Now you, Jebesh!”

“My job is to maintain safety. And every stranger who comes here is my business. I have informed myself about our guests. Our records for the area of the sea where Thiroki claims to have found them show no traces of a crash. I had the area combed thoroughly. There’s no wreckage, no remnants of oil or other liquids on the sea surface. Nothing. So they didn’t crash, but rather were dropped off by a spaceship. Why? In addition, they converse with each other in a foreign language that does not resemble a Ferron dialect. And while we’re at it, even though they are very similar to Ferrons in terms of their appearances, some of them have skin colors that I have never seen in a Ferron. What is the probability that a group of dark-skinned Ferrons and albinos will accidentally end up in the sea near Kimmon only to be brought to the city?” He pointed accusingly at Thiroki.

“What do you mean by that?” Thiroki told him. “Are you saying I’m collaborating with the strangers?”

“It’s nice that I didn’t have to say it myself.” He turned his head and peeked into a bowl standing in the corner.

“Enough,” Alrad interrupted the two. “Where are the strangers now? I want to see them for myself.”

“We accommodated them in the apartment with the roof terrace. It seemed a safe place to keep them.”

“Thank you, Thiroki! Bring me to them.”

“Alone?” interjected Jebesh. “I demand that you be accompanied

by guards."

"Jebesh, I admire your mindfulness to duty. But it's still my decision who I talk to and how, isn't it?"

"Yes, Superior," he hissed between clenched teeth.

"Good. And I want to get an impression of the strangers for myself, without either of you telling me how to assess them. Understood?"

"Agreed," Jebesh murmured.

Alrad turned her gaze on Thiroki.

"Agreed," the fisherwoman replied.

Alrad stood in front of the group of strangers and addressed them. "My name is Alrad. I am the Superior of Kimmon. Were you told that I was coming?"

One of them stepped forward. "My name is Perry Rhodan. We are very happy to make your acquaintance. May I introduce you to my companions?"

He pointed in turn to the members of his group and gave their names. Alrad tried to memorize all the foreign-sounding names.

"I want to get straight to the heart of the matter. Who are you and how did you get here?"

"First of all, we would like to thank you for rescuing us. Without your people, we all would have drowned."

"You're welcome. But your fate has not yet been decided. So..."

"Good." The stranger began his story. "We were all prisoners of the Ferron fleet. Two of my companions come from Ferrol, from the area around Thorta. One of my companions comes from a small colony on Byton, the rest of us from a small village on Rofus. The different uses of bio-tech led to different appearances among settler

groups. The small size of the colony on Byton, on the other hand, is the reason you have never heard of dark-skinned Ferrons."

The stranger pointed to his companions one after the other.

"About a year ago, we were each found guilty of resisting the central government," he continued. "It was little things: a thoughtless conversation here, a political discussion there. But the central government was no longer willing to tolerate such dissent. We were arrested and locked up in a prison camp on Pigell. That's where we met. We were able to escape to a transport ship to Reyan. Unfortunately, we were discovered on board. They threw us overboard without so much as an afterthought. We would have died on impact or drowned without a trace. That was certainly what the guards had in mind."

Alrad listened to the story calmly. Jebesh was right. These strangers were odd. At first glance, they all looked like Ferrons, but...only Chaktor and Lossoshér were real Ferrons. They spoke a peculiar type of Ferron, but their facial expressions, their behavior, were completely in line with that of normal Ferrons.

The rest of the group was...different. This Tschubai was dark-skinned, almost black like the night. The others who had rallied around Perrodan were too pale, too tall, too slender, almost too scrawny to pass as Ferrons, especially Thora, who was far different from the norm. In general, many little things were wrong. The hair color wasn't not right—one even had fiery red hair, which didn't match his skin color at all. And their body language was wrong. They spoke Ferron, but with a strange accent. Facial expressions and gestures sometimes coincided with what they wanted to express, but many times they were completely wrong.

Alrad didn't know what to make of the strangers. She dared to give in to her gut feeling: "Perrodan, I'm a politician. I know my way around lies. And you're lying."

The stranger made an attempt to interrupt her, but with a swift hand gesture, she cut him off.

"No, you don't have to worry about me throwing you into the

sea as some of my staff have suggested. But I don't like being lied to. I'll give you until noon tomorrow to tell me the truth. All the best!"

Without another word, she turned around and left the apartment.

In front of the building, Alrad was greeted by Jebesh. Wordlessly, she tried to pass him and disappear into her quarters.

Jebesh stood in her way. "What did I tell you, Superior? Those strangers are dangerous. They—"

"Thiroki spoke for all of us," she harshly rebuked him. "The strangers are our guests. And you will guarantee their safety with your life. Understood?"

Jebesh took a step back and lowered his head. "Forgive my brash words."

She followed up: "Was I clear?"

"Yes, Superior."

"That doesn't sound good. Not really." Bull shook his head disapprovingly.

"Thank you, Reg!" replied Rhodan. "That's exactly the kind of encouragement I need now."

"Perry, you had no other choice," the Arkonide interjected.

"Thora, thank you for your kind words. I still believe that we can't tell the truth to the Superior." Rhodan shrugged. "So our only option is to escape."

"Where to? Out to sea?" Bull seemed less than enthusiastic about the idea. "Of course, anything is better than waiting here for the Superior and her minions to expel us."

“They aren’t minions, Reg. But in principle, you’re right. Let’s get everyone together; we have to make a decision.”

Rhodan tried to catch Lossoshér while everyone gathered for the conversation. “What scared you so much?”

Lossoshér first looked to see if anyone could hear. “Rhodan…not here, not now.”

“After the meeting?”

“I guess…” replied the old Ferron evasively.

They didn’t take long to reach a consensus. Except for Lossoshér, who was sitting thoughtfully in their circle but made no comment, everyone agreed that escape was the only way to dodge the messy situation.

Tschubai was sent to explore the city under the cover of darkness. Rhodan encouraged him to be extremely careful. They couldn’t afford an abruptly appearing non-Ferron being traced back to the guests.

“Perry, I also have no interest in being put out at sea…so, I’ll be careful!” With those words, he disappeared.

While they waited, Rhodan tried a few times to talk to Lossoshér, unsuccessfully. The old Ferron sat there, silently thinking, the journal that Chaktor had given him in his hands. He repeatedly evaded Rhodan’s requests for conversation.

Rhodan therefore asked Chaktor directly if he could do anything with the information in the journal.

“History has never been my strong point,” Chaktor replied meekly.

It took forty minutes for Tschubai to finally return.

“I found a ship. It’s a speedboat, a kind of Reyan catamaran. The jetty there is guarded, but the ship itself is not. We can jump right there from here. But I can only carry two people at a time, then I

have to jump back and recover a little. Maybe a jump every ten or fifteen minutes, that's all there is to it."

"Chaktor and Reginald will start," Rhodan ordered. "I trust the two of you to familiarize yourself with the conditions on board. Then Thora and Sue. Finally, Lossoshér and me. That way, we have a Ferron in both places just in case we need help from a local. Agreed?"

Everyone agreed.

The plan went smoothly. Tschubai jumped onto the speedboat with the first two. A little later he was back, breathless, but satisfied. The second jump was much more strenuous for the mutant. This time, it took longer for him to come back and even longer for him to jump again.

After his second jump, Lossoshér and Rhodan were left alone in the apartment. As soon as Tschubai had disappeared, Rhodan turned to the guardian, who looked up with tired eyes.

"It was clear to me that you would take advantage of this opportunity."

"I'm curious."

"That's not all, Rhodan. You have a kind of curiosity that is fascinating."

"Thank you. Am I really just curious now?"

"I don't know. Sit down!" Lossoshér pointed to the couch. "It's hard for me to remain standing any longer."

"Fine." Rhodan took a seat next to him.

Lossoshér held up the journal. "Do you know what this is?"

"Something that scared you a lot." Rhodan diplomatically dodged the question.

“What did Chaktor say?”

“I think it’s a five-year plan for the settlement of Reyan, right?”

“It’s even more. Since it seems to be the basis for a kind of referendum, it has been distributed to all households. That’s how it ended up here. And it has a date.”

“So?” asked Rhodan.

Lossoshér seemed to collapse a bit. “Rhodan…our Ferron traditions disagree about what triggered the interplanetary war that ushered in the Dark Ages. But all the texts agree on the date.” He tapped his fingers on the journal. “I did a little math based on the information here. In my opinion, that date is the day after tomorrow.”

Rhodan winced. “The day after tomorrow. By then, we should have long since left the planet. You said that there are transmitters everywhere in the system. So on Reyan too, right?”

“Yes.” The old man thought for a moment. “There should be two, if not three, transmitters whose locations we can reach in the given time.”

“Good. But that’s not what worries you.”

“I’m not afraid for our safety.” Dark spots appeared on the old man’s face. “It’s about my people. Countless will die, and we will run away!”

“Lossoshér, this is history. The past,” Rhodan tried to reassure him. “It has long since happened in our present.”

“Still…”

“Everything we see around us here no longer exists. It’s long gone. These beings are like…ghosts to us. They seem real, but they’re long dead.”

“Rhodan, no. They are alive, here and now.” Lossoshér hit the armrest of his armchair. “This is all real. Their lives are real. Here.

Now. That's all that matters."

"Lossoshér, it is clear to you that we *must* not intervene. Think of the consequences of explaining the future to these Ferrons."

"Should I be silent?" Lossoshér grew loud. "Should I watch all this knowing that it will be over in two days?"

"But we would change your history," Rhodan said imploringly. "There might not be an attack by the Topsidans, no emergency call by Kerlon, we would not travel to the Vega system, and then we could never go back in time to warn the Ferrons in the first place. It would be a time paradox of unimaginable proportions and unmistakable consequences."

"We have already intervened, Rhodan. Without us, Guall would never have become Thort."

Before Rhodan could answer, Tschubai appeared in the middle of the room.

"We'll continue this conversation another time," said Rhodan.

Tschubai looked at the two of them confused. "Am I interrupting?"

"Of course not, Ras. We were just talking about the situation. Is everyone safe on the speedboat?"

"Yep, no problems on the other end! We're just waiting for you, then we're ready to go."

"Good." Rhodan reached for Tschubai's hand. "I'm ready."

Hesitantly, Lossoshér stood up and clasped hands with Tschubai. "Me too."

Rhodan calmly looked at the crew of the freshly captured boat. It had been agreed that they would loosen the lines and slowly disappear from the island area so as not to attract attention immediately. With Lossoshér's help, it should be possible to identify

one of the islands where he said there was another transmitter. Rhodan had not told the others about the deadline that Ferron history gave them. They just had to reach the island early enough.

Bull theatrically took a step forward and raised his hand to his temple for a salute. “First Mate Bull of the HMS Bounty! We are ready to place the ship under your command, Captain Rhodan!”

Rhodan smiled a little, but he did not respond to Bull’s display, instead raising his hands. “Can we talk for a moment?”

The two went to the bow of the boat, followed by some irritated looks from their companions.

“Bull, I know it’s the smartest thing to just disappear here.”

“Right,” his friend agreed. “This is not our time; we’re just observers here.” He again suppressed a yawn.

“Aren’t you well?”

“It’s nothing. Maybe all this is just too much for me here. You know...time travel, transmitters. And then the question of what we should do.” Bull seemed to be looking for the right words. “Perry, I really believe we can’t do more than just observe.”

“But we’ve intervened before,” Rhodan replied. “Without us, there would be no Thort.”

“Are you sure? If we hadn’t done it, someone else would have done it. We don’t have the right to simply change the history of the Ferrons.”

“No matter how much suffering we could prevent?”

Bull gave him a skeptical look. “You know something.”

“Yes. We could prevent a terrible event.”

Bull was visibly struggling with himself. “Perry, it’s not our history. We aren’t part of it. Something brought us here, and our only task is to disappear again as quickly as possible.”

After a moment of reflection, Rhodan straightened up. “Reg, no matter what I decide, will you follow me?”

Bull sighed. “As always…yes!”

“Good!”

The pair rejoined their circle of companions.

“I’m sorry,” Rhodan said to the others. “I learned something from Lossoshér that nullifies all our other considerations.”

He glanced over at the old Ferron, who looked back at him with wide eyes.

“We’re not running away! There must be another, better way!” Rhodan stretched out his hand to Tschubai. “Ras, if I want to implement my plan, I need your help. Can I count on you?”

12.

Crash on Titan

Titan

October 6, 2036

Manoli was completely quiet. The long training, the many simulations before his first space flight, the flight to the Moon...they had all paid off.

I have been trained for situations like this, he told himself. Another breath. *A landing on the Moon was no more difficult or different than a landing on Titan.*

Aescunnar and Gucky had their combat suits on; only the helmets were still open. Aescunnar clenched his teeth; his jaw muscles were tense. Gucky sat silently next to him, his paws clasped on the armrests.

It was difficult for them because there was nothing for them to do at the moment. They could not intercept the spacecraft. But maybe he could.

The craft behaved like a dog bolting out of a pond, shaking the water out of its fur. But this was not an animal; it was a mechanical object.

Manoli tried once again to get the ship under control. Nothing happened. The displays were dark.

“Crap!” he blurted out.

Now, years of routine were paying off. He had familiarized himself with the systems at the start. There was an emergency system for each case. The Arkonides had been using space travel for so long that they were guaranteed to take precautions for any kind of emergency.

This time, Manoli did not try to start the engine again. His search was for an emergency mechanism that was to be activated in case of engine failure.

“Close your helmets! Make sure the spacesuits are completely sealed!”

Next to him, he heard the clasping sounds of fasteners being shut. Aescunnar and Gucky followed his instructions without comment.

This time, he managed to resort to an emergency system. It was not something that made it possible to prevent their fall to Titan or get into a stable orbit. The only thing the spacecraft had to offer was a redundant system of mechanical rudders that turned an unguided crash into a steered crash.

“Well then, we’ll do it this way.”

A voice crackled through a speaker in his helmet. “I can get all of us out and jump to the surface.” Gucky had managed to activate his intercom.

That mousebeaver never ceases to surprise me again and again. Sometimes he seems so playful, so cheerful, but underneath it there’s another level that is neither funny nor cheerful.

Manoli pulled himself together. At the moment, there was no time for such frivolous considerations. All his concentration was back on trying to control the craft’s descent. With the rudder system, he was able to transform the spinning of the spaceship into a more or less controlled glide.

Aescunnar and Gucky remained silent, and he was grateful for the quiet, as it allowed him to concentrate on achieving something similar to flight in the dense atmosphere of Titan. It reminded him a little of his first test flights on board a glider. Training as an astronaut included completing appropriate flight hours on conventional aircraft. He was reluctant to think about his first try. You were pulled up with a powered plane, which should have been simple. He’d just had to fly to an agreed upon destination and land

there. But the first thing Manoli had done was lose sight of his target. From the air, everything had looked so different...

At the moment, he felt the same way. Titan had few landmarks that you could memorize. There were dunes and dunes and a variety of lakes but Manoli determined his position by referencing the few landmarks that he could identify perfectly. He was still trying to get as close as possible to the landing site of Tifflor's flight.

Gucky's voice sounded again. "I can get us out of here!"

"This craft is one of the three operational spacecraft that humanity possesses," Manoli replied. "I will not give her up sooner than necessary!"

Now he also heard Aescunnar's voice. "Manoli, you're absolutely right. I trust you."

Manoli was grateful to the historian for the encouraging words.

Again, the spaceship bucked. The atmosphere seemed to rebel against the fact that the ship was simply gliding through it. The control system defied his instructions several times, which necessitated elaborate correction maneuvers.

"Close your helmets!" he commanded. He could only hope that his two companions would obey the order. He did not risk a sideways view, however, as all his attention was on controlling their descent..

I can do it! He was calmer than he had been in a long time. *I can do it. I have been trained for this!*

Suddenly, another shockwave shook the ship. The craft turned to the side; it seemed like it wanted to roll over. Manoli tried to compensate for the rolling movement with the help of the rudders. He succeeded at first, but again and again the spaceship moved to the left. It was impossible to ensure a controlled crash.

Still, he tried to stabilize the flight. Any correction immediately became null and void when, in addition to its lateral movement, the ship began to tilt drastically forward.

“Crap!” he yelled again as the ship rolled over its bow.

He felt a paw clap down heavily onto his shoulder, and a moment later, the spaceship around him was gone.

13.

Give Me Freedom or Give Me Death?

Reyan

Sometime

The streets of Kimmon were as busy as always. Telgar was not used to so many strangers around him. He had to think. He couldn’t do that if he had to greet someone every three steps or even stop for a conversation. This was a life he never wanted to lead.

His steps led him down to the pier, to the museum area. Here, life was as he normally lived it every day. Only here did he feel as if he himself were an exhibit. Were those called fish really a reminder of a lost era, exhibits to be stared at in a museum?

He went to the end of the jetty. Then he rolled up his pants legs, took off his shoes, and draped his feet in the water.

Telgar was not satisfied with what had happened in the last few days. Getting to Kimmon had not been difficult. It made him sad to be so far away from his family. The two big children tried everything to cheer him up. But Telgar was a family man; he needed his wives and children around him to be completely happy.

Here, he was surrounded by many whom he might call good acquaintances, but he had few friends. There were others who used the annual festival to make acquaintances, to negotiate contracts, or to plan which family connection promised the best profits for their family for the next few years. But this was not his way. Nor was he one of those for whom the annual visit to Kimmon was a welcome opportunity to try out further “innovations” on their bodies.

Telgar would still be an unchanged Reyaner today if the accident had not forced him to have his arm “repaired.” Deep inside him there was a hole, a feeling that occasionally told him he hadn’t done the right thing at the time. He didn’t want to be any different from the Ferrons. Despite their distance from the mother world, despite the four hundred years that the colonists had lived on this world, there was a deep bond with other Ferron colonies. They shared the same culture; there was still a lively trade in books and data from Ferrol. His family members spent many evenings reading or exchanging information from the main planet.

None of them had ever been to Ferrol. Reyan was their home. But the place from which their ancestors had come was Ferrol, and he did not like the fact that they were developing more and more into Reyaners. Not that he would mind being a Reyaner—but for him, all Reyaners were also Ferrons, even if not all Ferrons were Reyaners.

Over the last few days, he had had many conversations. The extraordinary meeting of the Council he had convened had been the last drop in the barrel of resentment. Many other families had had the same experiences. *You can’t trust the mud creepers*, it was said again and again. *We have to trust in our own strength*.

But no one really seemed to think through the consequences. It was one thing to stop selling Umbra to the country dwellers. If they didn’t have Umbra to offer, they wouldn’t get paid for it either. That would mean that the next year would be one full of deprivation. First, you would save on the things that were luxury. The books, the tapes from Ferrol. Surely one or the other would find that the new lungs or the trend-colored flippers were not affordable.

Their ancestors had endured it for many years on Reyan without outside help...and what were the land dwellers other than their access to trade with the other planets? But Telgar knew that those early years were only beautiful in memory. They needed medicine from Ferrol, spare parts, certain metals, but they also needed news from Ferrol with its theaters and stages, its publishers and broadcasters. Reyan was a world of its own, but it was strongly integrated into the Ferron culture.

In recent years, he had not thought about such things. He was a fisherman. But now, surrounded by a mood of turmoil, of revolution, even, he became a thoughtful man. He had not worn his opinion on his sleeve before, but had rather been the silent listener. This had now benefited him.

What he heard frightened him. The plans for actual resistance against the land dwellers were advanced. They all promised violence. It was clear to everyone that real resistance would not be feasible without bloodshed.

Telgar just wasn't sure if that was really a price he was willing to pay. Because at the end of this dispute, there would be several cultures. There would never be a chance for Reyaners again, but there would be forever and ever land dwellers and sea dwellers on Reyan, divorced by the memory of land grabbing and violence.

And that was the last thing he wanted.

14.

Built Close to the Water

Reyan

Sometime

Alrad tossed and turned in her bed. The sheets were wet; her pillow disheveled. She kicked at her blanket to get it back into a comfortable position while lying on her back. She tried falling asleep, but alas, sleep eluded her.

So, she decided to try something else. She focused on listening to her heart. Relax, breathe in, let the pressure melt off her shoulders... Her eyelids became heavy, her eyes became tired... Then again the image of the strangers intruded on her thoughts.

The next day was tough. She had to make a decision. But it was not easy to determine the future of one's own world when all the things one thought one knew about one's own world were turned upside down within a few hours.

She closed her eyes again. Her eyelids again became heavy. Her breathing became calm. She felt her heart beat slower. A warm glow seemed to begin in her stomach and spread throughout her body. The warm glow grew bigger and bigger. It turned into a nuclear explosion. Ferrol spaceships were bombing the cities of Reyan back to the Stone Age.

Alrad was terrified. The hair on her neck was standing up. Her legs were shaking. She had dug her fingernails into her palm. Her body felt like a single contorted muscle.

She assumed the fetal position, bringing her knees to her chest and clutching her ankles with her hands to ease the cramp. Tears burned in her eyes. She fought the pain, breathed calmly, and hoped that the cramp would soon stop on its own.

It took a few minutes for the tremor in her legs to subside. She threw off her blanket and got out of bed. She got undressed, tossing her clothes onto a pile next to the bed. Barefoot and naked, she felt her way into the basement in the complete darkness of her house. There, she opened a hatch in the ground. *It does have its advantages, being Superior*, she thought.

She stretched her feet down into the hatch. The water swirled around her legs. She pushed herself into it, took a deep breath, and was then underwater.

As always, it took a moment for her breathing to change. In the beginning, she had panicked and wanted to return to the surface. But now...it was different. Usually, they were hidden under her clothes, but she had gills on the sides of her body that allowed her to breathe underwater, while breathing through her nose and mouth on land.

The operation had been painful and expensive. She had conquered the pain easily; you didn't become Superior without having strong will. The money was just a minor bump in her finances, nothing more. She could afford to fully experience this world—*her world*—on land and in water.

Alrad dove down. The light of the city reflected on the surface of the water; the deeper she went, the more her eyes adapted to the changed light conditions. She saw flowers dancing in the current, trying to catch as much light as possible. She saw fish glittering in all the colors of the rainbow. They played with each other, forming circles that intertwined like wheels of fire before seeming to dissolve into themselves.

She saw the seabed, so clean and so pure that one could not even assume that the Ferrons had a settlement nearby. She knew the seabed near the settlements of the land dwellers. They had marked the sea and the land with their sign. Nothing there was as it must have been thousands of years ago. The situation was different here. The ground here was marked as if with a fine rake. The water smoothed the ground, cleaned it, drew on it.

She turned on her back. With a steady, leisurely leg stroke, she

swam away. The fish near the island were not big enough to be dangerous to her. Alrad knew the terrain, just as she sensed the depth, in which one could float on one's back without worryingly making unpleasant contact with rock formations.

Above her, she saw from time to time the keel of a ship, the poles of a jetty, the lights of a house. But at this depth, she was alone.

She felt as if she were floating right on the border between two worlds. Below her was the sea: ancient, unchanging, powerful. Above her, land: changing, violent, young, and dynamic.

She let herself drift. The world around her could not save her, no matter how much it seemed like paradise down here. The planet's ecosystem had changed over the past four hundred years due to the presence of Ferrons. It preserved what was to be preserved. But from year to year it became more difficult to resist the wishes and demands of the mud creepers.

The tensions were there: between mud creepers and fish, between colonies and the main world, between the genetically modified Ferrons and the old—style Ferrons.

Underwater, everything seemed as if it could last forever. Alrad knew that this was just a dream, a fantasy of a perfect world. Unfortunately, life was different. The tensions would come to a head sooner or later. Even if it were possible to prevent the outbreak of war now, it would come eventually. And the mud creepers were powerful enough to force the fish to join them. Only when the fish had put themselves at the service of war would the Reyans be united. If the fish refused, then...the Superior knew that the mud creepers were very capable of bringing them in line with threats and pressure.

She pondered. Was it possible to reject the governor's demands without fear of reprisal?

And what about her other questions? Who were the strangers? What role did they play? Could it be a coincidence that they had just appeared out of nowhere at such a critical moment?

A shadow approached from the side. Alrad remained very calm. Predators only become dangerous when the potential victim showed it was afraid. But it was not a dangerous animal who approached her; it was Thiroki.

“What are you doing here?” Conversations underwater required a certain amount of practice. But Alrad had learned not to have to give up the gift of language, even there.

Instead of answering, Thiroki just smiled mischievously.

“I want to be alone, Thiroki,” said the Superior. “I have to think.”

Thiroki’s smile turned into a wide grin. “Then let me think with you. Being together is better than being alone...”

She remembered the day when her childhood friend Beirtna had not come back from the sea. It hadn’t been possible to clarify what had happened to her. *The water gives and the water takes*, said the fish on such occasions.

Beirtna had left behind a problem: Thiroki. Officially, no one knew who her father was. Alrad had a suspicion, but she hadn’t told anyone. The little Reyan girl was now without parents. And so she had been placed with her mother’s best friend—Alrad—for the first few days until a final decision could be made.

She had never wanted children of her own. Politics had always been both her partner and her family. She hardly made any close friends because she was always afraid that someone would use her feelings against her. And then the accusation of nepotism always hovered in the room when you approved someone with whom you were friends or even related. But she had never had to decide to accept the child into her family because Thiroki had simply been delivered to her.

Months passed before permanent accommodations for Thiroki had been found. A family in which she could grow up. But the bond that had formed between the two had proven to be strong enough

to connect them as adults.

She is the daughter I will never have, Alrad realized once again. In public, she behaved very officially and very distantly towards Thiroki; only in the water and in a very private setting did they switch to a more familiar tone in their interactions. Nobody knew that they went diving together at night. This created a common world in which they could play around underwater for hours, but also discuss serious things and exchange gossip.

They appeared at the same time, playing with each other on the surface of the water. When they were tired, they let themselves drift, only kept afloat by a few swimming movements. They discussed the events of the last hour. Alrad talked about her conversation with the governor, and together they discussed Jebesh's role in the conflict, and the impression the strangers had made on her.

In the end, they agreed that the only real coincidence was the strangers. They had "simply appeared" out of nowhere in an already charged situation.

They eventually parted ways, but not without agreeing to meet again the night after next. Even now, Alrad didn't dare to tell her friend that she would probably not be able to make their planned meeting.

Alrad reentered her house through the canal. As soon as she got out of the water, she heard that there were people in her house. She quickly threw on a bathrobe and hurried upstairs to her living room.

Jebesh looked at her, dazed, as she appeared in the living room, dressed only in a bathrobe and a knife in her hand.

"What are you doing just showing up in my house unannounced?" she asked him accusingly.

"Superior, we were worried that you might also have disappeared after we could not contact you."

“What do you mean? “She asked.

“The strangers are gone.”

Now, of all times! As if they knew that I wanted to question them again. “Wake up the whole city. Lock everything down. Find the strangers, Jebesh—no matter how!”

Jebesh was distracted by something that was happening behind Alrad. She turned around. In front of her stood three of the strangers, having materialized out of nowhere: Lossoshér, Perrodan, and Ratschubai.

It was Perrodan who spoke up first. “Superior, that will not be necessary!”

Rhodan did not know what had happened before his arrival. Alrad had damp hair, as if she had just stepped out of the bathtub. This notion was supported by the bathrobe, which she had obviously hurriedly thrown on, as the belt was only closed quickly but effectively with a double knot. But what did the knife in her hand mean? And what was Jebesh doing here?

Jebesh stood behind Alrad as if spellbound. He was armed, but their strange appearance seemed to have taken him completely by surprise. The Superior had herself surprisingly well under control.

But if you want to attain such a high position as hers, reacting well to unprecedented situations is likely a requirement, Rhodan thought to himself.

Alrad finally reacted. “How did you get in here? And what do you want from me?”

“To tell you the truth,” Rhodan replied.

“Now, all of a sudden?”

“Dear Superior, I know we have invaded your home...”

“You’re not the only one tonight,” she commented with a sideways glance at Jebesh, which Rhodan did not know how to

interpret.

“But we have to talk to you. Alone,” Rhodan said.

“You mean, me alone and the three of you?” The Superior had apparently regained her composure.

“I know,” Rhodan relented, “that it must all sound very strange. But I can explain everything if we can talk to you privately. Please, trust me!”

Alrad turned to Jebesh. “Since some of the strangers have reappeared and I hope for an explanation, we can call off the search until I find out what is going on.”

“But Superior! I can’t allow you—”

“Yes, you can!” said Alrad. “And you will. Go with your people to the front of the house and stand guard. Keep them and yourself nearby. Thank you!”

Jebesh left without any objections. Alrad turned to Rhodan. “I would like to return the knife to its place in the kitchen and put something else on. I hope that a few minutes of waiting time won’t change the fate of the world?” She looked at Rhodan. Apparently, she was frightened by what she saw in his face. “I’ll hurry.”

With those last words, she disappeared from the room.

When Alrad entered the room a few minutes later, Lossoshér and Tschubai had sat down elsewhere. Only Rhodan was still in the room.

“You wanted to talk to me.” Alrad’s conversation opener was not a question but a statement. She still had damp hair, but she now wore a simple outfit in yellow and orange.

“Yes,” Rhodan replied.

“Well, spit it out!!”

“We are not refugees,” Rhodan began his statement.

“That much was clear.”

Rhodan smiled thinly. “We are time travelers.”

“Come again?” Alrad stared at him as if she wanted to have him thrown out of the house and into the arms of the soldiers who were certainly standing guard outside.

“It sounds insane, I know,” Rhodan continued his explanation. “Please, hear us out! We are historians from the future. In the future, Ferron culture has progressed further, individual groups are also developing further away from each other in terms of outward appearance. This explains our differences in size and skin color. We have our reasons for examining this time period. Unfortunately, there was an accident when we were just about to explore the surrounding area. We had to leave our vehicle over the ocean and were picked up by your people.”

Alrad remained silent for a moment. “Why should I believe you?”

“Because it’s the truth,” Rhodan noted. “And because it explains a lot: our sudden appearance, our different appearances, our knowledge of your culture, and so on. And there’s another reason.”

Rhodan gestured to Tschubai, who promptly teleported from the armchair five meters through the room to another seat. Then he got up and teleported back to Rhodan’s side.

Alrad stared at the teleporter as if he were a ghost. “That explains...a lot,” she noted. “But...why did you suddenly decide to tell me the truth?”

“Because our conscience has left us no other choice,” Rhodan replied. “Our expert for this era is Lossoshér. Maybe it’s better if you talk to him.”

The old Ferron had been waiting for this moment. First, he told the Superior in short sentences how independent developments had come about in the colonial worlds after their settlement. Then he

talked about the events of the next few days: the dawn of the Dark Ages.

“The historical records of the time ahead are contradictory, but one thing is clear,” Lossoshér continued. “The Dark Ages will be triggered by an event that will take place in two days.”

Alrad became pale when she heard that.

“Does that date mean something to you, Superior?” asked Rhodan.

“Yes.” She looked like she had to do everything she could to regain her composure. “I need a moment.”

It took a few minutes for Alrad to figure out how to proceed. She could not help herself; she believed the strangers. Suddenly, the various pieces of the puzzle that hadn’t made sense suddenly came together.

Alrad gave herself a mental nudge. She told the strangers about her meeting with the governor, about the planned rebel conference, which was to take place on the date known in their future as the beginning of the Dark Ages.

At the end, everyone was silent. Alrad had her hands under her thighs as if she didn’t want them to move uncontrollably. Tschubai and Rhodan had listened, unmoved.

“This is our chance,” Rhodan finally spoke up. “We must prevent the war. We will accompany you. We have to change the rebels’ minds.”

“It won’t be that easy,” she replied. “Even if it were to succeed, which I doubt, what would be the consequences? You said you’re from the future. This future is only possible through war, through the Dark Ages. Why would you travel here when there is no longer a reason to do so? And will you be born at all? Will you exist?”

“It’s difficult to explain,” Rhodan replied. “Time does not follow conventional logic.”

“I believe you,” Alrad said after a few moments. “I think it’s best if you accompany me to Rey. Do you agree?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Rhodan, so be it. Then I should now tell Jebesh that he can finally stop the search for the strangers. And I will have your status changed so that you are treated accordingly.”

“Thank you very much.”

“One more thing. You said that an accident with your time machine brought you here. Does that mean that our time is now your home forever?”

“No,” Rhodan replied. “We know that there is another time machine on this planet. We would be delighted if you would help us to track it down.”

“It would be an honor!”

15.

Titan Splinters

Titan

October 6, 2036

Manoli blinked. He had just been in the reconnaissance aircraft. Now he was obviously standing on Titan. A strange atmosphere wafted around him.

He looked around. Through the fog, he saw two people. The figures looked like ghosts, like shadows in the thick haze. *Nitrogen, hydrocarbon, and various other gasses*, Manoli recalled. *I'm on Titan. Keep calm.* He observed the two shadows more closely. They were, of course, Aescunnar and Gucky.

Manoli bobbed forward briefly on the tips of his toes. *Gravity…almost like on the moon. Gucky must have teleported us out of the reconnaissance craft*, was his second thought, *even though I still had a chance to save it.*

At that moment, an outline approached from above. It penetrated the atmosphere incredibly quickly. *The ship…* The strange outline—*our ship*, he corrected himself—came in at a steep angle. Gucky had hopefully planned his jump well, so they wouldn't be slaughtered by their own craft there on Titan.

My assessment was wrong. The craft could not be saved. He cleared his throat, then activated his helmet radio. "Thank you, Gucky! That was close." He faltered for a moment. "You were right; I wasn't able to save the ship. Without you, we would now be…"

He didn't get to finish his sentence. The imposing spectacle in front of him robbed him of his voice. The craft smashed through the ice at an acute angle, just like a hot spoon cutting through a tub of vanilla ice cream. It could briefly be seen in its entirety, a huge outline; then it was half in the ice before disappearing completely.

“Wow!” Manoli heard a voice.

“Aescunnar, is everything okay?”

“As good as can be,” the historian replied. “After all, we’re still alive. And the craft didn’t crash on our heads.”

“You’re welcome.” Gucky’s voice sounded shrill in his helmet. “And now...”

Manoli never heard what the alien was suggesting. Under him, the ice began to rise up. A triangular ice tip of perhaps thirty meters pushed itself up in front of him at lightning speed. The edges of the ice tip looked white, icy, and razorsharp, as if someone had broken a large window and was now stabbing at the doctor with a huge splinter.

Frightened, Manoli leaped to the side. Due to the low gravity, it was more of a big jump, which was immediately transformed by the combat suit into controlled flight. A warning message appeared on the display, but it disappeared immediately.

Lucky, Manoli thought. Under him, he could clearly see Titan’s ice sheet breaking up along fine lines. *Like a frozen lake when it thaws*, he thought.

He slowly floated down towards the ground. Aescunnar had also jumped. His lack of spatial experience was evident as he tried to correct his flight path with his arms. *No wonder; as an astronaut, something as basic as that becomes second nature.*

Manoli’s second glance was at Gucky, who was flying with his combat suit. Safely and calmly, he moved forward; it seemed as if he wanted to catch an optimal view of his surroundings from several vantage points.

There is more to that furry animal than you might think at first glance, Manoli mused. *So Aescunnar may not be entirely wrong in his reservations...*

“Oof,” a voice came through the radio in his helmet.

“Aescunnar? All right?” Manoli carefully made a small hop.

“Yes. Or maybe not. We are on Titan without a spaceship, and the ice is breaking below us.” The historian laughed meekly.

“Let’s keep calm, my dear friend.” A second small hop brought him up to two meters from Aescunnar. Manoli wasn’t sure how he had reached the point of using such familiar wording like *dear friend* at that moment, but he suspected that Gucky was coping with the situation better than expected.

Manoli himself had looked space and death in the eye so many times now that it did not frighten him to be not on the surface of the Moon, but a moon of Saturn, on which he could perhaps expect his end.

But can Aescunnar cope with the situation?

Carefully, so as not to jump too far, he took a step towards the historian. Then he looked around. The lines in the ice had become finer and smaller, but they were still spreading like an ever-growing spider’s web on the lunar surface.

“What…was that?” asked Aescunnar.

“It’s the moon,” Manoli replied. *I have to make sure he stays calm.* “The moon has an ice sheet. The ship has smashed through it. It was probably damaged on impact and exploded. So it’s pretty hot down there, but the ice around it is cold. Then the two extreme temperatures met. That’s not good.”

“And what do we do now?”

Manoli didn’t have to think twice. “Gucky, can you hear us?”

He was relieved when he heard Gucky’s voice in his helmet. “Of course I can hear you, and see you. Why?”

“Look, we have to get out of here.” *Hopefully, Aescunnar won’t panic.* “The ice below us will soon break. There’s probably a huge ocean below it. So it wouldn’t be good if we fell into it.”

He received no reply. But a fraction of a second later, Gucky was standing in front of him. At first glance, he looked like a boy who had tried on his big brother's pajamas. Gucky didn't quite fill the suit. *But he still manages to move around in it without any problems!* Manoli was again surprised by their companion's abilities.

"Where to?" asked Gucky.

Manoli had previously looked to see which direction the ice seemed safest in. He pointed with his arm. "Over there, as far as you can! Once we're safe, we can reorient ourselves."

The mousebeaver stretched out its arms, touching Manoli and Aescunnar, and teleported.

Soon after, the three of them were looking back at the place where they had just been standing. The sight was apocalyptic. *Like a painting by Bosch…an illustration of the end of the world*, Manoli thought. *Or ice in space, as painted by Caspar David Friedrich.*

The large ice splinter was clearly visible, even from where they were. It protruded like a candle; as though it had always been there. Steam rose up around it. The heat of the crashed reconnaissance aircraft was still raging deep within the ice of Titan. *An explosion. The reconnaissance ship has exploded! There's nothing left to save…*

The light was pale. The fog became completely opaque due to the emerging wind. The light gave everything a strange glow.

It's foreign. It's threatening. And yet it's beautiful. Manoli indulged in the luxury of taking in the sight for a moment.

"And now?" Gucky's voice quickly brought him back to reality.

16.

Underwater

Reyan

Sometime

With strong movements, he pulled his body into the depths. Above him, the noisy world sank away. Beneath the surface of the water, his kingdom began. The realm that was the birthright of the Reyans: the ocean.

Telgar enjoyed gaining distance from the noise of the world this way. *If the scientists are right, our ancestors came out of the water a long time ago. What could be more obvious than to return here?*

The first meeting with Kimmon had gone better than Telgar had thought possible. He had brought his anger, his frustration, with him to the island. *It would have been better if I had left those feelings in the sea.* Another swimming movement brought him deeper. It had taken him years to learn how to swim underwater with his right strong arm without always drifting to the left. He used his legs to stay on course.

To his left was a school of golden fish. The animals were used to beings like him swimming among them. The Larpi were small, cute creatures. Many Ferrons had imported Larpi from Reyan to keep them in their homes in large aquariums. They were considered sociable but harmless. *A little like us*, Telgar thought. *And like us, the Larpi are inedible.*

Kimmon was the primordial cell of the Reyans, their home, their origin. The colonization of the planet had begun there. *We Ferrons did not go ashore to become rational creatures. But we do return to the water here to come to our senses.*

With strong movements, he swam back up to the surface. Greedily, his lungs sucked in the air. Then he lay on his back,

paddling with his feet and arms to stay afloat.

Above him, the starry sky spread out wide. *The big fish. The three sisters. The transformed Shazam. The singing sword.* All the constellations were clearly recognizable. *Was it the light of the stars that lured us out of the sea?* On nights like these, Telgar was willing to think so.

He was tired of the conversations he had been having for days. It was always about the same questions in preparation for their negotiations with the mud creepers. Were the fish strong enough to take them on? Would they manage to represent their interests in unity? Would they succeed in bundling their concerns in such a way that they did not get bogged down in negotiations with the land dwellers afterwards?

Everything we do becomes unimportant when we think about how old the stars are. They will still shine when I am no more. When there are no more Reyans, no more Ferrons.

He turned back onto his stomach, took a deep breath, and dove down again. The light of the stars became darker, the sounds disappeared. The Larpi were still there, inspecting the large fish that descended towards them.

Telgar dove deeper. He had to think about what the sea around the other islands looked like. *Dirt. Sick plants. Areas where hardly any fish lived anymore.* The land dwellers used the sea as a resource, not as a habitat. They didn't seem to care what they were doing to the planet.

The Vega system is rich in planets. Once we have finished looting one, we can fly to the next. This was the credo that the fish often accused the land dwellers of living by. Down here, it was almost as if there were no rural dwellers. Here was the last piece of sea that still belonged to them.

But if we want this habitat to be preserved, we have to fight. Not only for us, but also for the Larpi. At this thought, he had to smile.

A stabbing feeling in his lungs made it clear to him that he had

to return to the surface. He swam back up, taking a deep breath as he treaded water with his legs.

For a while, Telgar lay on his back. Then he turned over and swam towards the shore with strong arm movements.

I love these moments. I couldn't live without them. I can't live without this world.

Telgar knew what he had to do.

17.

The Conference of the Blue

Reyan

Sometime

Perry Rhodan held on to the railing with both hands. The catamaran was making good time. Alrad had assured them that the trip to Rey would only take a few hours.

His companions were all below deck. In their clean garments, the Terrans, and especially Thora, looked even more alien to the Ferrons than before.

But maybe that's exactly the right thing to do if we're to talk about the Ferrons, Rhodan thought.

Lossoshér did not feel comfortable, and the rocking of the ship had only increased his anxiety. Several times, he had disappeared to the bathroom to sacrifice—as one would say in the Navy—Neptune. The last time he came out, he had looked as pale as you could be with bluish skin.

Sue wasn't doing well either. She had also vomited a few times and had gone below deck to sleep a little. *Hopefully the little one will survive all this*, Rhodan thought to himself.

Next to Rhodan, a light—skinned hand grasped the railing. He didn't have to look over; he knew which redhead it belonged to.

"A fascinating sight!" said Bull.

Rhodan was silent. Together they looked at the spaceport, which lay on an artificial island connected to Rey by a land bridge.

Bull tried again. "Did you ever think that was possible, Perry? The two of us on an alien planet, under an alien sun?"

“Don’t say that to Thora! She’s probably already seen tens of thousands of spaceports.”

“Oh,” Bull said, “I don’t yet believe in the famous adage, *you know one, you know them all*. This is the navel of this world—its connection to space.”

“Do you think Terrania will be such a juggernaut someday?”

“I hope not, Perry!”

Rhodan looked at his friend in surprise. He went out of his way to dispel the impression that his flippant comment might have triggered an emotional response.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Bull said. “Of course I want Earth to have a spaceport. No, two spaceports, three spaceports, four! But Terrania, the Gobi Desert, are as far away as possible from these paradise islands. We have made land arable that would never have been available for settlement. Here, on the other hand...”

“Yes, it’s a pity. This world used to be a paradise.”

“But without a spaceport, there is no space travel,” Bull noted. “Without technology and progress, there’s no conquest of space.”

“Think of the Earth. Remember how close we were to destroying ourselves—and close we still are.”

“Correct. Probably more like ‘will still be close to it,’ if I’m getting the timeline right.”

“Reg, it’s all a little too much for me. We’re pilots, not physicists.” Rhodan sighed. “Time travel, time paradoxes. How do our Ferron friends deal with the situation?”

“For Lossoshér, his stomach has taken the brunt of the situation, and he’s also seasick. But at least that keeps him distracted.”

“And your friend Chaktor?” asked Rhodan.

“My *friend* Chaktor. He’s brooding. He’s just been looking at the

pictures of his family. I think he's thinking about whether he'll ever see them again."

Rhodan pointed to the panorama spread out in front of them. "And he doesn't care about this?"

"It's easier for Chaktor deal with it himself."

"Thora?" asked Rhodan.

"I thought Thora was above the Ferrons on your list of interests."

"Reg, I don't have a list of interests."

Bull shrugged. "If you say so. So, Thora, *Miss Arkon,* is master of the situation. She probably calculated all possible time paradoxes down to the third decimal place. Surely there is an Arkonide time travel guide with its own chapter on ethics and morality in preventing historical wars."

"She didn't deserve that, buddy."

"Yes, she did," Bull replied categorically.

Rhodan knew his friend didn't mean it. It was his way of letting off steam—a little sarcasm, a little cynicism, a little irony. If they were in danger, Rhodan could blindly rely on Bull. But in the times between such critical moments, this was his way of venting.

They left the catamaran at one of the outer jetties. The island was almost full with parked vehicles, as Rhodan noted with amusement. So, this wasn't just a problem native to his homeland.

They were expected by Ferron officials; according to Alrad, these were employees of the governor. As they set out to leave the catamaran, Thora gave him a hand signal to stay with her. They were among the last to leave the ship.

"Yes, Thora? What can I do for you?"

"Are you sure you're doing the right thing?"

“You don’t approve of my approach?” asked Rhodan.

“Rhodan, you are a fool. Who do you think you are that you can change the course of history?”

Rhodan sighed. “I’m a person whose conscience leaves me no other choice.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.” With those words, Thora left him and caught up with Lossoshér and Chaktor.

Rhodan and Bull tried to follow the content of the conference as far as possible. They constantly had to ask Chaktor or Lossoshér which colony, country, or city the speakers came from. Even Lossoshér could not always help; some names had changed over thousands of years, cities had passed or been newly founded, and the individual parties were difficult to separate.

The basic theme was always the same no matter which speaker came to the podium: the colonies allegedly had no choice but to strike Ferrol with force. A long litany of Ferron attacks was listed and explained. The basic message was always the same: no matter where, no matter how, behind all crop failures, misfortunes, and disasters, the central government on Ferrol at fault.

Rhodan had noticed two exceptions. On the one hand, there was an impressive older Reyan named Telgar who repeatedly urged people to think about the consequences of their actions. He argued against a war that could be started but not ended. And a tastefully dressed manager named Teldara poured oil onto the flames several times, attributing all the problems to the fish, not to the home world of Ferrol.

The political situation seemed confusing to the Terrans.

“It reminds me of the old joke about the farmer who insured his barn against fire and hail,” Bull whispered to Rhodan.

“And?”

“Then his neighbor asks him, I can see why you insured against

fire. But how are you going to make it hail?"

"Reg, I don't feel like laughing."

"But I had to think about the story. They would even blame the hail on the central government."

"Reg, we humans are and were no different."

Bull was silent for a moment. "Right. But you only learn from mistakes."

Rhodan continued to pay attention to the conference. Alrad hadn't said a word yet. The governor of Reyan, who had been introduced to him as Flark, stepped up to the podium. He and Alrad had probably agreed on which of the two could speak for the planet. Flark was probably the one who had more experience with colonists from the other planets. But in Rhodan's opinion, Alrad had a strong moral compass, an inner guide that was not often found in politicians. He was curious to see if Flark had a similar constitution.

After Flark's first few sentences, Rhodan knew this was not the case. Flark explained that the Reyan ships were in attack positions at Ferrol. If the central government did not stop its aggression against the colonies, he would have no choice but to allow the use of force against the motherworld.

Next to Rhodan, Bull clenched his hands. "Those fools!"

"We weren't any better," Rhodan said.

"It still hurts to listen to it."

"Alrad hasn't spoken yet!" Rhodan said to his friend.

The Superior finally stepped up to speak. She had no documents or notes with her. She leaned her hands on the podium as if she had to hold on to stay standing. Rhodan had to hand it to her—she had presence.

Once she had the audience's full attention, she began. "Good afternoon. My name is Alrad. I speak for those who many of you

call ‘the fish of Reyan.’ And I think we’re about to make a big mistake.”

As soon as she had uttered those words, the first cries of protest rang out. Alrad gesticulated until calm returned.

“You don’t have to believe me. There are others who can explain this better than I can. I therefore ask my two companions, the stranger Perrodan and the Ferron Lossoshér, to share their information with those present.”

18.

Out of Breath

Titan

October 6, 2036

Eric Manoli felt tired. This strange exhaustion came over him at the worst possible times. *I've examined myself over and over*, the doctor thought. *I'm not sick.*

Calmly, he mentally felt over his body. Except for a certain fatigue, he seemed perfectly fine. Then he remembered his training as an astronaut. *Only when you are completely sure can you be completely sure.* His instructor had instilled this and similar outrageous doctrines in him again and again. It was only under Saturn that he realized how important such maxims could become for a person.

He calmly checked the displays of his suit. *If only to be absolutely sure. Something just…*

Manoli had to clear his throat before he could speak to Aescunnar and Gucky. "Hm. I think I have a little problem."

"What?" Aescunnar's voice rang out in his helmet. "You have a *small* problem? What would be a big problem when lost on a distant moon?"

"Psst," Gucky said. "The doctor has serious concerns."

So that's how it feels when your own thoughts are read… "Aescunnar, Gucky, I just checked my suit. It's losing air."

"How bad?" Aescunnar's voice sounded slightly shrill with worry.

"Well, I still have a few hours left," Manoli replied.

The other two remained silent.

“Hey, I’m not dead yet!”

It was Gucky who was the first to react. “What do you think we should do?”

“Maybe we can join our suits together and give him some of our air?” Of course, Aescunnar would suggest something like that.

“No,” Manoli replied, “that doesn’t make sense.”

“Or seal the leak?” Another suggestion from Aescunnar.

“Thank you. The hole must be tiny; otherwise, I would already be dead. The information provided by the positronics is clear: it was a splinter. But it doesn’t offer us any other information. It was probably just a splinter from when the wreck smashed through the ice.”

Aescunnar remained silent.

“So?” Gucky said again.

“Were we at least able to put out a distress signal?”

“Aescunnar, there wasn’t enough time for that.”

“If I hadn’t jumped, there would have been…” Gucky complained.

“No, Gucky, you did everything right,” Manoli reassured him. “It’s not as bad as it looks at first glance. They know on Venus that we were on our way to search for *Igita*. So sooner or later they will come looking for us.”

“Do you have enough air to wait for a rescue expedition? And will they even be able to find us?” Aescunnar sounded worried. *No wonder.*

“Don’t forget what our mission was. We’re here to find the wreck. We’ll find and explore the wreck. With a little luck, there’ll

still be air on board. Or at least supplies."

"Great!" growled the historian.

"Unfortunately, somewhat impractical," Gucky objected. "I can do a lot of things...but locating a wrecked spaceship...I can't do that."

"Isn't the wreck also under the ice?" argued Aescunnar.

Manoli thought for a moment. He looked at the sky and the terrain formations around them. "I think I know where we are."

"On Titan," Gucky commented dryly.

"Thank you, I know that. No, I memorized the map of Titan. Also, from the beginning, my goal was to land near the wreck."

"Did you manage it?" asked Aescunnar curiously.

"No," Manoli replied. "Titan always turns the same side to Saturn. With this, we can figure out our position based on Saturn's position. In addition, we were flying over Xanadu when the problems began."

"Xanadu?" asked Aescunnar with a mocking undertone. "Like in Shangri—La and Avalon?"

"Aescunnar, my suit is losing air, but my brain is still working. Xanadu is a huge bright region on Titan that can be seen from orbit. In addition, the ugly lake out there..." Manoli waved his arm in its direction, "...is quite clearly the Ligeia Mare."

He took a moment to make the necessary calculations in his head without the other two interrupting him. "But if I'm right, the wreck is several thousand kilometers in that direction!" He pointed his arm to the left.

"Are you sure?" Aescunnar sounded worried. "That's a pretty big distance."

"I know." Manoli sighed. "First, we do have the combat suits.

Second, gravity on Titan is about as much as that on the Moon, one —seventh of Earth's gravity. Flying here costs less energy than on Earth. And third, there is no reason to keep me here even a second longer, gentlemen."

It took a moment. Then Gucky erupted in laughter. A little later, Aescunnar's laughter followed.

They set out.

Despite Manoli's attempt to talk up their journey, it was still quite an ordeal. Physically, it was not that strenuous; they did have the flight capabilities of their suits. But the surface of Titan did not offer them any respite from the monotony of their flight.

This is how the first people who walked to the North Pole must have felt. Ice. Ice. Ice.

There was no reason to talk. The environment was strange, but after a hundred or two hundred kilometers, they were tired of pointing out interesting surface formations to each other. Every hour, they took a short break so that Manoli could make sure they were on the right track. They continued to fly in the direction that he told them.

During the trip, Manoli had initially kept a critical eye on his oxygen indicator. Then he realized that he would only get more upset and consume more air. He preferred to avoid looking at it.

Gucky held up amazingly well. Even Aescunnar went out of his way to appear at ease with the situation. They had become quieter, only grunting from time to time. Even Gucky held back his comments.

Manoli only heard his own breathing. And in between, he thought he heard the throbbing of his heart in his ears.

"It should be here."

Aescunnar seemed unconvinced. "Here?"

Manoli was quite convinced. “This is exactly where the cryovolcano that Tifflor went through to get to *Igita*.”

Gucky looked around, inspecting the area. “I don’t want to complain, but there’s nothing here!”

Manoli shaded his helmet with his hand. He turned around in circles. “I’m very sure. There's the rock that looks a bit like a crouching hawk. On the other side, there’s the crater with the small line in the middle. Plus, just look at Saturn. It has to be here and nowhere else.”

“Could we have gone off course?” asked Aescunnar uncertainly.

“You don’t get a little off course on a foreign moon and still manage to get to the same landscape as the one you wanted to go to.” Manoli had to control the tone of his voice so as not to sound annoyed. “The cryovolcano was here, I’m sure of it.”

“I believe you.” Aescunnar’s tone still sounded a little skeptical. “But where has the volcano gone?”

Manoli pondered. “Maybe it’s frozen? The impact of our ship has thrown a lot of ice and steam upwards, maybe that covered it.”

“Not a bad idea, but it’s too far. But, of course, ice volcanoes often crop up around here.”

“Is it all right if I look around?” asked Gucky.

“Of course.” Manoli was very grateful that he was allowed to take a break for a moment.

Gucky disappeared. A little later, he appeared about three hundred meters to the left in front of him. He teleported again to appear three hundred meters farther to the right. This time he did not jump immediately, but stared at the environment.

“Here,” he said. His sentence was drowned out by a scream as Gucky suddenly slumped down. He did not disappear completely—when only his upper body was left visible, he was suddenly carried up by a wave.

“That’s it! That’s it!” Manoli exclaimed.

“What?” asked Aescunnar.

“That’s the cryovolcano! It was frozen, just like I said. And even Gucky was heavy enough to break through the ice. I was right!”

19.

Searching

Reyan

Sometime

“I continue to believe that your decision was wrong. The strangers are not worth the effort.”

The scout was tired of his ship’s arguments. Every single step of his search had so far led to resistance from the ship. But these strangers, who had passed through the transmitter without authorization, remained an Enigma. His time-consuming review of the transmitter data had clearly shown that it had not only come from a foreign location, but from another time.

“Again, we have to find the strangers. They do not belong here.”

“But…” The ship still had objections.

The scout roughly interrupted the voice. “No. The risk that they may trigger a time paradox is simply too great to ignore.”

“I don’t think the strangers are a danger. They left the ship and fell into the sea. From this height, they cannot possibly have survived impact.”

“It’s as impossible as leaving the ship without you being able to stop them…”

The ship did not respond to his taunts but tried again to argue with him. “Even if they survived the impact, they were far out on the ocean. The native flora and fauna are dangerous. They cannot have survived.”

“Is there any new location data?” The scout changed the subject. *Why do I have to answer to my ship?*

“At the point where they should have impacted, I can only make out a single vehicle.”

“A vehicle?” The scout listened. “What kind of vehicle?”

“A motorized boat,” the ship replied.

“Good. And how many people were on board?”

“One. A Ferron.”

“We’ll continue to observe the situation.”

The scout carefully examined the movements of the ship.

“The ship is carrying out a search maneuver. Someone is busy doing circles from strangers’ crash site. He’s looking for the strangers just like we are... Ship, get him on board.”

“I have to say that the last strangers on board—”

“Ship! We have to find the strangers. Get the stranger on board and transport him to one of the rooms on your periphery if you agree with this safety precaution.”

“Good.”

Jebesh didn’t know what had happened to him. He had just been searching the surface of the sea with the ship for a clue about the strangers. Then a dazzling white light engulfed him and pulled him upwards.

He must have lost consciousness. When he opened his eyes again, he was in a kind of meeting room. He looked around. There was a single door, no windows. He groped for his gun and found that it had disappeared.

At that moment, the door opened. An older Ferron entered. He looked...kind, old, and wise. Nevertheless, Jebesh remained cautious.

“Who are you?” asked Jebesh.

“My name doesn’t matter. You can call me the scout. We seem to have a similar goal; we are looking for the strangers who have fallen into the ocean here.”

“Are you one of the strangers?”

The Ferron, who had introduced himself as *scout*, thought for a moment. “It might be easier if I said I belonged to the same group. But no. I’m just looking for them.”

“Good.” Jebesh breathed a sigh of relief. He hoped to have found an ally who was as critical of strangers as he was. “The strangers left for Rey. They have convinced the Superior that they are from the future.”

Jebesh carefully observed the scout. Upon hearing the word “future,” the man seemed to cringe a little. Jebesh decided to push further.

“Now they want to use their knowledge of the future to talk the Ferrons out of a civil war. A looming civil war that I didn’t know would happen until yesterday. But the Superior is eating out of their hands…”

“From the future…” The scout seemed to ponder the notion. “That means that they have knowledge that does not belong in this time. And they want to exploit this knowledge to change the future. That’s worse than I had imagined.”

Jebesh was pleased with the direction the conversation was taking.

“That means you’re going to do something about the strangers?” he said.

The scout did not seem ready to respond to his question. His answer was dismissive. “Thank you for your willingness to tell me your story.”

“Are you also from the future?” asked Jebesh.

The scout laughed. “No, most certainly not.”

“Where are you from, then?”

“From a very different place…” The scout nodded to Jebesh. “I’ll have you taken back now.”

“But…I have so many questions for you. Who are you? Where are you from? What do you want from us?”

The scout turned his head to the side to speak directly into the ship’s recording devices. “Ship, the usual procedure.”

“Fine.”

A white light enveloped Jebesh.

When he woke up on his boat a little later, the Feron wondered if he had fallen asleep during his tiring search. He couldn’t remember what else he might have done in the last few minutes.

20.

Down to the Sunless Sea

Titan

October 6, 2036

Manoli's cry had just faded in his ears. Aescunnar knew immediately what had happened: Gucky had found the cryovolcano exactly where Manoli had predicted it. Manoli had achieved an astronautic feat when he calculated their path across Titan's surface.

Aescunnar did not know whether he would have been able to lead his fellow astronauts calmly even under the best of conditions. *And Manoli knew all along that his suit was losing air!* Aescunnar was impressed by his companion's resolve.

Finding the cryovolcano also meant that the wreck had to be nearby. So, they came all this way for nothing. *A long journey across the solar system. Who would have ever thought that Mama Aescunnar's son would one day travel to Titan to test his theories?*

Aescunnar had to smile. *My mother's name wasn't Aescunnar, and neither was my father's. You don't just rewrite the history of mankind, but also your own history when you pour history into words. And I tried both...*

Only he himself knew how arduous his path had been. How many times he had been ridiculed in the scientific world, how *mad Aescunnar* had been insulted behind his back as a fool. *And now, all of a sudden, with the appearance of the Arkonides, all the puzzle pieces have fallen into place. There is a picture, a large, colorful picture. Yes, we had visitors from space. Yes, there used to be astronauts on Earth, long before we humans thought of advancing creating our primitive satellite.*

On a moon, far from his earthly home, Cyr Aescunnar treated

himself to a small moment of triumph.

It didn't take long for this feeling to subside. Aescunnar was a sharp thinker, but he was also a realist. And his realist side told him that they were far from reaching their goal.

They were three people—no, two people and Gucky—on a lifeless spatial body orbiting a gas giant. His human companion was wearing a spacesuit that was losing air. Their only chance was to find the wreck and hope that on board they would be able to fill up the air in Manoli's spacesuit or even exchange it for a working one.

After that, all that would remain would be waiting...the uncertain wait for someone to miss them and look for them. *And whether we will be saved before Gucky and I run out of air...*

Aescunnar looked at the small alien. Gucky was busy uncovering the entrance of the cryovolcano. He wasn't using his extremities, but rather his telekinetic gift. Pieces the size of cabinets detached from the shaft of the cryovolcano, were lifted upwards and then carelessly thrown behind him. Manoli stood close to Gucky so as not to be hit by falling pieces of ice.

Aescunnar activated his helmet radio. "Hey, you two, I'm coming over to you now. Gucky, please be so kind as to not let anything fall on my head."

Gucky stopped his activity. "Don't worry. I'm almost through anyway. Manoli thinks we can get down there."

Aescunnar did not know whether he should be enthusiastic about this idea. "Can't we teleport in or gently glide down there?"

Manoli replied, "Aescunnar, Gucky can certainly only jump to a place he can see. And I don't want to show up with him and you in a side wall or in the middle of a block of ice." He took a break. "And as far as gliding is concerned, come here and look at the passage that Gucky's uncovered. It's going to be a climb, not a suspension railway ride."

Aescunnar listened closely as the doctor spoke. *Is he already short of breath? Is he breathing more deeply at the end of each sentence? How long will his air supply last, damn it?*

Manoli was absolutely right. The descent through the shaft of the cryovolcano left no option but to move slowly downward one after the other. It was a descent into the ocean under the ice. And all this in the hopes of finding the wreck somewhere beneath.

Gucky was the head of the small team, as he was most likely to be able to eliminate objects that stood in their way. If necessary, he was also able to avoid a threat with a quick jump. Manoli followed behind him. He and Aescunnar had briefly argued about who should take the center position. Only when Aescunnar pointed out to Manoli that he could fall over at any time due to lack of oxygen did the doctor finally give in. Aescunnar didn't want to stand nervously every three or four meters to make sure Manoli was still behind him. So Aescunnar had taken position up at the rear of the small group.

Actually, they should be playing the song "Peer Gynt" here, Aescunnar thought. *In the halls of the Mountain King, it would be a nice accompaniment to our experiences here.*

When he was a child, his parents often had to move because his father was employed in the diplomatic service. All the more reason for his father to ensure that Aescunnar always had a teacher on site who would let him continue to read and write German in addition to their residence's national language. One of his earliest memories was of the German-language fairy tales, which his father had stored on his son's computers so that he could get used to the world of legends. This had been the historian's first encounter with myths and legends. From there, it was only a small step to dealing with the stories of his family's host countries.

But at the moment, he had to think of the descriptions in the fairy tale of Rübezahl: the large, sparkling halls in which the light of the candle was reflected by the gems on the corridor walls. When he looked around now, he felt just like that visitor to Rübezahl's world. He almost expected a giant to immediately come bursting

around the corner, holding a candle in one hand, in the other hand a stick, to be used both as a weapon and a cane.

Manoli's voice brought him back to reality. "Aescunnar, that's where the ocean begins. If Tifflor's records are correct, we should see the wreck right away." Manoli's voice paused. Agonizing breaths could be heard. "So, look around both of you."

How bad is Manoli? Why doesn't Gucky just jump and look for air supplies? Then he remembered what Manoli had told him about the mutant's gifts. Manoli was absolutely right: they had to locate the wreck before they could help the doctor.

The ocean was very different from what he knew from the seas on Earth. It was cloudy, cold, and devoid of life. Even the most boring spot of the German Baltic Sea coast was richer in life. Titan's ocean was empty of any life at all, and if scientists were to be believed, there had never been life here, nor would there ever be native life.

But now we are here. He looked around. It would be nearly impossible to overlook the wreck. Nevertheless, it was Gucky who was the first to make a discovery.

"Over there. That must be it. Spherical, maybe two hundred meters in diameter."

Aescunnar looked in the direction Gucky had indicated. Indeed, there was a shadow that could only be the damaged ship. But the position of the shadow was strange. He looked at the area below the wreck. Apparently, the ship was resting on an unsafe surface—it looked as if the craft was literally on the brink.

From his current position, Aescunnar could not tell if the ball was on the edge of a rock or on ice. But it all looked as if it would roll out of its position at any moment and fall down.

Hopefully, it'll last a few minutes until we can get some air for Manoli, he thought.

"Do you see that too?" asked Gucky. "The craft could slip at any

second."

"Yes," Manoli confirmed. "But we have no choice..."

Carefully, the group approached the craft. It was not more than a wreck. *It will never fly again!* was Aescunnar's first thought once he was able to take a closer look.

The surface was no longer a perfect sphere. Someone must have gone to great lengths to destroy the ship. It looked as if someone had poked a grapefruit with a sharp spoon and then jerked the spoon out again, with pulp and skin stuck to it, torn out of the fruit.

There were funnels, the result of explosions that had penetrated parts of the hull. Around the wreck hung various parts that were probably still connected by individual pieces to the main wreck but would never play a role in flight again.

It was a sad feeling for the historian to see such a technological marvel as this Arkonide ship, knowing full well that it would never fly again.

But that's not our problem right now. The main thing is that they have air on board.

"It's *Igita*." Manoli's voice was sounding increasingly short of breath. "And she was shot down."

He was right. As Aescunnar drew a little closer, he noticed the black stripes on the ball: remnants of near-hits or damage that could affect the surface but had not penetrated.

"How do we want to get in?" He was the first to tear himself away from the sight of the ship. His companions did not immediately respond. "Gucky? Manoli?" he asked worriedly.

It was Gucky's voice that replied. "Manoli has fainted. His oxygen supply is nearly gone."

Aescunnar looked over. The doctor hung like a limp sack in his spacesuit, which stabilized him even in his current state in a halfway upright position.

“Or the fatigue he has complained about the last few days has overwhelmed him,” Aescunnar said. *Hopefully it’s only the fatigue and Manoli won’t suffocate just before we finally get inside the wreck!*

“Look, can you jump in blindly?”

“Yes,” came the skeptical—sounding answer from Gucky. “But I don’t know if that’s such a smart idea.”

“Gucky, we don’t have time to look around for a door or an opening mechanism. Manoli won’t last that long. I spent a while studying what we know about Arkonide ships. I have an idea. We’ll take Manoli between us and move as quickly as possible to an intact place of the outer wall, preferably as close as possible to the upper pole of the spaceship. Then you jump two or three meters forward with us. This will be enough to get into the wreck, but would not lead to generator rooms or similar large facilities at the pole of the ship. With a bit of luck, we will find rooms or corridors that are locked with no penetrating water and perhaps even breathable air!”

The Ilt thought for a moment. Manoli was still unconscious.

“Gucky?” said Aescunnar. A jolt went through him.

Gucky moved towards Aescunnar. Together, they took Manoli between them and maneuvered him to the described place before the polar rounding of the wreck. Once there, Gucky made physical contact with the two humans.

Aescunnar pressed his jaws together so tightly that his cheekbones hurt. *Now I can only hope that everything I know about teleportation is correct. Otherwise, hopefully it will be quick and painless if we should appear inside an object!*

Titan’s ocean was no longer flowing around him. He was in an almost square room. *The outer hull of the ship. We are close to the outer shell, hence the slightly rounded ceiling,* Aescunnar thought to himself.

The room was empty. They were lucky...

Aescunnar looked at his suit's display. Breathable air, albeit a little low on oxygen. Aescunnar did not waste a second looking at the display, but immediately opened Manoli's helmet. After a moment of hesitation, Gucky helped.

Not the usual procedure, Aescunnar noted, *but at the moment, we have no other choice.*

Manoli wasn't moving. Through his suit, Aescunnar could not feel whether the doctor's heart was still beating. *By the time I take off the suit, it might be too late to help him.* That's when he came up with an idea. "Gucky, can you try to force him to breathe with your gifts? Press on his chest or something like that?"

"Of course."

Gucky did not move, but Aescunnar had the impression that the Ilt knew exactly what he was doing. Gucky manually operated Manoli's body better than Aescunnar could perform CPR. After a few moments, the doctor opened his eyes...and immediately coughed.

Relieved, Aescunnar leaned back. Then he opened his own helmet with calm movements. When he breathed in the air, he knew why Manoli had coughed immediately.

"It smells as if no one has bothered opening a window here for thousands of years." He also coughed. The air was stale and cold. Aescunnar looked over at Manoli with concern. "And now?"

The doctor cleared his throat. "Since there is air here or something similar to breathable air, we should start looking for a supply with which we can fill my suit. Maybe we'll even find something to patch it up." He coughed again. "Or we might even find a whole suit. That would make waiting for a rescue team much more pleasant."

"And then, back to the surface," Aescunnar added. "The faster we get out of this wrecked craft, the better for us."

"No," Manoli disagreed. "Thanks to Gucky, we can still jump if

necessary. First the oxygen. But while we're here, we'll also look at the ship's interior!"

21.

Under Fire

Reyan, Sometime

"What I have to tell you will be hard for you to believe." Rhodan looked down into the expectant faces of hundreds of Ferrons. "I don't come from this world. And the two of us..." Rhodan pointed to Lossoshér standing next to him, "...aren't from your time."

Some Ferrons in the crowd looked amazed, others surprised. But the louder murmurs among the crowd told him that many did not believe him.

Which is completely understandable... Rhodan thought to himself.

He cleared his throat. "We have evidence for our claims. But in the end, *you* have to decide if you believe us...and you must believe us in order to avert a terrible threat to the worlds populated by Ferrons. The age that begins today will be called the Dark Ages by future generations. The war you are unleashing today will not be over when the last of you dies. And the war will cost the lives of countless Ferrons."

Rhodan looked up. The hall was silent. *Do they believe me? Do they think I'm crazy?*

"We are observers from the future, researchers whose task it was to find out the reason for the war. But we came to realize that we can't just observe. We cannot allow our inaction to bring terror and suffering upon Ferron civilization. Records from this era are...incomplete. But we know that today the foundation will be laid for a war that changes the face of all Ferron worlds. We cannot and will not allow this to happen."

Rhodan stepped aside. With a wave of his hand, he asked Lossoshér to take over at the podium.

“Ferrons!” the elderly alien began, “all we ask for are a few moments of your time. We will answer any questions that might serve to prove our origins from your future. Even if you don’t believe us, give us a moment of your time so we can prove who we are, where we come from, and what lies ahead for you in the near future if you don’t heed our warnings.”

While the old Ferron spoke, Rhodan kept an eye on the hall. Those present were divided in their reactions. One half was surprised; these men and women apparently could not comprehend why a stranger and a Ferron would claim to be from the future. The other half seemed almost grateful to Rhodan—grateful that someone was giving them an opportunity to reflect on their decisions that very well might cause a war.

Lossoshér called on the Ferrons to oppose the course of history as it was known from future history books. “History is not carved in stone.” He pointed to Rhodan. “The two of us know that you can change history, because we’ve already done it. We hope that we can avoid that long period of time, the Dark Ages. We believe...no, we know that...”

Lossoshér was interrupted. A loud siren rang out through the room.

An alarm, Rhodan deduced. He couldn’t see where the noise was coming from. The first Ferrons had turned around and were heading in an orderly manner towards the exit. *Do they believe it’s just a drill?*

The siren did not stop. None of the Ferrons managed more than three steps before they all began running, all in the direction of the exits. Now an orderly evacuation was out of the question.

Lossoshér stood stunned at the podium. “What was that? Why...”

Rhodan grabbed the Ferron by the elbow. “I don’t know. But an alarm was raised.”

“Because of... Because of us?”

“I doubt it,” Rhodan replied. “Otherwise, the guards would have

grabbed us by now. Everyone is running outside; we should join them."

Rhodan looked around for Alrad. She was speaking frantically to another envoy who had just put a hand to his ear. *A mobile communication device, obviously subcutaneous*, Rhodan thought.

Alrad listened, then nodded. Then she turned to the group around Rhodan.

"Perrodan." There were tears in her eyes. "We have to stop the speech. It's too late. Too late for everything. Rey is under attack!"

The area outside was full of delegates. Rhodan's group was hectic. Some Ferrons had immediately rushed to their vehicles. Wherever you looked, helicopters and planes were leaving the city of Rey. Many Ferrons had set out on foot to rush to their boats. According to Alrad, Flark was on his way to the spaceport to coordinate what he called "the defense of the planet."

A few had stayed with Alrad. They all watched the spectacle that presented itself to them in the sky. A huge spaceship approached the island. Rhodan recognized it—they had fled it before. It was the huge blue sphere.

Explosions flashed around it.

"The people of Reyan are firing at the ship," Bull said.

"I can't see the attackers. Do you see anything?"

"No," Bull replied after a while. "But I would assume the Reyans would attack a spaceship that appeared over their capital without warning."

"What would you do if that thing popped up over Terrania?" asked Rhodan.

"First try to make contact. Then fire."

"Two worlds, one thought," Rhodan returned dryly.

“Scout, I don’t know if...”

“It’s my decision,” the scout interrupted roughly. *I have to remember that it has no feelings. I only gave him this voice so that I would feel like I was communicating with a living being. It’s not one.* “How far is it to the island of Rey?”

“Two minutes.”

The scout had folded his hands behind his back. The ship did not need his help for the flight maneuver. His job was to make the decisions. At the moment, he didn’t know if what he was doing was the right thing to do.

I have to prevent the strangers from changing time. A time paradox triggered in this solar system would have unforeseeable consequences. I have to act, he told himself.

“Scout! I’m picking up foreign ships.”

“The Reyans probably. They will try to bring us off course. Their technology is far inferior to ours, which is why...”

The scout had to stretch out his arm to support himself as the ground below him suddenly tilted to the left.

“Ship?”

“We are being attacked by five enemy units.”

“Ferrons?”

The ship needed a brief moment to respond. “No, the ship’s design is unknown to me!”

The scout reacted immediately. “Evasive maneuvers!”

But it was too late. The ground swayed under him again. Another shock threw him against the wall. He picked himself up and the door opened. Supporting himself with his hands on the

walls, he made his way to the bridge.

“Ship, status?”

“Protective shields are losing energy. I don’t know…” For a brief moment, the voice disappeared completely. As the ship continued to speak, it had its *old voice* again, that machine voice that the scout hated abysmally. “We have been hit.”

“Status?”

“Shields are critical. Outer hull unstable. Drive functionality unclear.”

“Send an emergency transmission.”

The path to the bridge lay in front of him and suddenly tilted to the side. The floor was a slope that he constantly slipped on. He put both his hands on the left wall and braced himself as he continued towards the bridge. He had become too accustomed to letting the ship steer. He had used his time elsewhere and this now threatened to be his undoing.

A blow forced him to his knees. The ship shuddered. Immediately, he stood upright again, only slightly closer to the bridge now than a few moments before.

“Ship. Status?”

Silence.

“Ship. Status?”

Silence.

“The sphere has been hit!”

Rhodan did not know which of the surrounding Ferrons had yelled that out. But it was true, the sphere was falling towards the water. The attackers had ceased fire.

“Reg, can you see what other ships there are?”

Bull again raised his hand over his eyes to shield them from sunlight. “I don’t see any. But they seem to have stopped firing at the sphere.”

The ship was tilted to the side. It kept bucking, gaining a bit of height, and then descending again. *One step up, two steps down*, Rhodan thought. *But its final descent will be unstoppable.*

His companions were standing a few feet away, watching the spectacle in the sky. Tschubai was quickly attracting attention with his dark skin color.

“Ras!” Rhodan called for the teleporter. Tschubai looked around, and Rhodan waved him over.

“What is it, Perry?”

Rhodan pointed up at the crashing ship. “Ras, can you jump aboard that?”

Tschubai also briefly looked up at the craft, estimating the distance. “I think so. Why?”

“Get the scout out. We’ll meet at the evacuation ship!”

Without waiting for an answer, Rhodan turned around. “Go, we have to go to the ship! Reg, take care of Alrad; Chaktor, help Lossoshér. We have little time. We have to get away from here.”

The next few minutes were a chaos of fleeing drones, ships taking off, and helicopters. The roar of boats departing at top speed filled the background. Bull dragged Alrad with him, and she offered no resistance. Chaktor had put his arm around Lossoshér’s waist and was helping the old Ferron to keep up with the others.

“Rhodan, what’s the point?” asked Thora. The Arkonide was now standing next to him.

“Thora, think! We wanted to prevent a war by talking about the future.”

“Right. But...” Thora was obviously confused by what was going on around her.

“Take a look around! Rey has been attacked. It doesn’t matter that the sphere may not belong to any of the factions. They will *fight back*. The rebels feel they are right because they have been attacked. They will strike with everything they have, if only because they are afraid that Ferrol will strike preemptively. The war we wanted to prevent...we’ve helped trigger it.”

Thora was surprised by Rhodan’s statement. “You’re right. I hadn’t thought about it like that before.” She thought for a moment. “Are we fleeing because of this?”

Rhodan looked at her briefly. “No, Thora. I don’t think the Ferrons understand that we’re one of the triggers for what will later be called the Dark Ages. We are fleeing so that we have a chance to find out what’s really happening here.”

They moved purposefully towards the pier. Rhodan risked looking over his shoulder. The sphere was still swirling, but it was clear that it would soon hit the surface of the water. He could not see any of the attacking ships. They must have ceased their assault when they’d realized the alien ship could not be saved.

Finally, the catamaran appeared in front of them.

“Everyone, hurry, get on board!” Rhodan herded his small group in front of him. “Alrad, order your people on board to help.”

The crew looked at the Superior questioningly. She made an approving gesture with her hand, and they immediately set about releasing the ship’s moorings.

“Stop! We’re still waiting for someone!”

The men and women of the crew halted, visibly irritated. Then their gaze wandered to Alrad.

“Do as he says,” she said, confirming the Terran’s order.

Rhodan didn’t have to wait long. A few feet next to him, two

people materialized. Tschubai had put the scout's arm around his shoulders. Now he too was at the end of his strength. Tschubai's face was lime-white, and sweat ran down his forehead.

"Perry," the teleporter panted, "I hope I have the right one."

Rhodan looked at him questioningly. "What do you mean by that?"

He pointed to the scout. "This wasn't the form I found him in."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Rhodan.

Tschubai's answer was more of a stammer. "No lips, blue eyes like marbles...a scar on his forehead like a snake." It was obviously difficult for him to continue speaking due to his fatigue.

"Later," Rhodan decided. "Reginald, Chaktor, help them on board. Then let's leave this port behind us!"

With the help of the crew, they managed to get the last two passengers on board.

As a matter of course, Rhodan took command once onboard. He looked at the bridge of the catamaran, the hurried crew members, Alrad sitting dejected in a corner, the scout, and his companions, who stared at him indecisively.

"Go, get out of the harbor, out onto open sea!"

"Which direction?"

"Take us as far away from that crashing ship as possible!"

The captain barked out orders to the crew, and the catamaran took off with a jolt.

"Can you show us the ship on a display?" Rhodan asked the captain.

The Ferronagreed, then input some instructions on the screen in

front of him. A crystal appeared, a clear image of the ship as it slowly descended.

Rhodan turned to the others. “Hold on!”

“What about you?” asked Thora.

Rhodan pointed to the image projected in front of him. “When that ship crashes into the sea, I want to be as far from the impact site as possible. And pray that the Ferrons do the same.”

Thora’s jaw visibly tensed. “I... I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Space is not the sea. There are no tidal waves out there when a ship explodes. But there are here.”

The catamaran headed for open sea. Rhodan still had the opportunity to hold on to the backrest of the captain’s chair with one hand. That’s when the scout’s craft hit the sea.

A huge cloud of steam immediately rose at the point where the ship had broken through the surface of the water. This was followed by a series of three dull explosive sounds, then a bright explosion. The shocks caused Rhodan to fall to his knees, even though he had his hand on the chair’s backrest.

Chaktor held Lossoshér, who would otherwise have been thrown against the cabin wall with full force. Bull had previously sat down with his back against the wall, Sue in his arms, so that she was protected from the expected shockwave. Two crew members stood near Superior Alrad and helped her.

The screen became as bright as the sun, then the image disappeared. The catamaran was lifted up on a huge crest of waves that pushed under the ship. Higher and higher the waves rose, and the catamaran rode them just as a surfer would ride the waves on Earth.

But we’re riding the wave to get away from Rey as quickly as possible, Rhodan thought.

The captain stubbornly kept the catamaran on course. From the

large window, the passengers saw the sky growing dark. Thick clouds were brewing.

That's how I always imagined the end of the world. But I'd always hoped that I could at least die at home when the apocalypse hit.

For three hours, they were not given the opportunity to leave the cabin. The ship was continuously shaken by shock waves. Initially, it was the waves and the wind. Later, a thunderstorm of unprecedented proportions poured over them.

The drops were not only made of water; many were mixed with tiny pieces of earth. Rhodan knew what that meant: the scout's ship had hit near Rey. Due to the force of the impact, at least parts of the island had been pulverized and thrown upwards into the atmosphere.

Rhodan only knew this effect from literature on terrestrial volcanic eruptions, but this catastrophe must have acted like an artificial volcano to have such consequences.

He had again taken his position behind the captain's seat. Alrad was no help in guiding the ship; she was now sitting on the ground, her legs tense, her arms wrapped around her. Her upper body swayed back and forth in a strange rhythm.

She risked everything by believing us. She wanted to prevent the future. Now she has lost everything...

Chaktor and Lossoshér said nothing. For them, this apocalypse had to be even more terrible than for the Terrans. It was a Ferron world that was being destroyed before their very eyes. And they knew that the events would be the trigger for an era they had desperately wanted to avoid.

Tschubai, Thora, Bull, and Sue all seemed as if they had resigned themselves to being mere observers. They had tried to prevent the future and failed. But what happened here wasn't happening to their world. It was like a disaster movie that you watched, spellbound, the arrival of a dark prophecy that you couldn't do anything about.

It would probably be different if we were on the Titanic…or in Gomorrah.

The rain was still pouring down. “Can we find out what happened to the others?” Rhodan turned to the captain.

The Ferron typed some commands into his terminal. “I’m receiving lots of transmissions. But no picture, only sound.”

“Good. Put the information on the loudspeaker so we can all hear what’s happening out there.”

A horrible mishmash of loud noises filled the room. After getting used to it, one could hear fragments of sentences, even short messages. Rhodan concentrated, trying to absorb as much information as possible.

“*The Gelat* here. We can no longer take in any more injured. We urgently need medicine and sterile instruments. Can anyone hear us?”

“The nefarious attack of the Ferrons will not go unpunished.” Rhodan believed he was hearing Flark’s voice. “At this moment, our space fleet is beginning to attack Ferron spaceports from orbit!”

“Here LL-308-P! We are calling the ships in the area. Water has breached our hull. We are trying to evacuate, but…”

“And Scimaton says the world will end in soot and flames, in spray and waves. Scimaton says that we have become vain about technology and…”

“Help! Help! We won’t last much longer. Water has penetrated our lower compartments. The power generation in Unit 3 is completely…”

“Turn it off!” said a voice accustomed to command.

Rhodan looked over at his companions in surprise. Alrad had risen. One of the two crew members had stretched out his hand to help her up. The Superior had rejected it ineffectually.

She turned to Rhodan: “Perrodan, we must speak.”

Uncertainly, she took a few steps towards the Terran. He came to her, taking her by the arm to support her. This time she did not resist the help.

Alrad made it clear to him with gestures that he should lower his ear to her. He still found it difficult to understand the Superior’s whispers.

“Perrodan, you and your companions must disappear. My compatriots are still in shock, but at some point the crew will notice that this stranger...” she pointed at the scout, “...does not belong to your group. And then you will not get far with your story of ambassadors from the future. They will be looking for someone to blame for this disaster, and, Perrodan, I think you are high on the list of suspects!”

22.

Questions upon Questions

Titan

October 6, 2036

"Why are we still looking around here?" moaned Gucky.

"Because we may never again have the opportunity to explore the *Igita*," Manoli told him.

"But didn't Tifflor and his companions already comb through it all?" asked Aescunnar.

"No," Manoli objected. "They were busy with other things."

The group moved down a corridor that Manoli seemed to hope would lead to the better-preserved interior of the ship. Until now, they had not had to open a single bulkhead. They had previously agreed to try as much as possible to go down corridors that were not locked. There was always the danger that Titan's water had penetrated the hull behind a closed bulkhead.

As long as Manoli could not close his spacesuit for an extended period of time without suffocating, they had to be extremely careful. So they remained in the middle of the sphere.

"But isn't it dangerous to stay on board?" Aescunnar had to think about how the *Igita* was perched on the edge of a cliff. The slightest shift in center of gravity, a flow from an unfavorable direction, could carry the *Igita* over the edge.

Manoli hesitated with his answer. "I'm not here because I want to avoid danger. And again, we won't have any other opportunity to explore the ship. Even if we don't stumble upon any Arkonide secrets, I'd be grateful if we could find a functional suit."

Aescunnar would have liked to have kicked himself in the butt.

How could I forget that Manoli's suit is broken? Without oxygen, sooner or later he will suffocate if he has to close his helmet.

"My apologies, Doctor Manoli. I was...distracted."

"Understandable," replied the doctor. "When will you have another opportunity to examine a wreck that crashed on Titan eons ago?"

"But why did it crash?" The historian's curiosity had been piqued and he wanted to get to the bottom of such questions. "*Igita* has been shelled. There is no other way to explain the traces of fire on the outer surface."

"Right," Manoli confirmed.

"But then why are some bulkheads open?"

"I don't know." Manoli continued to follow the corridors undeterred, although Aescunnar felt he was now deviating a little from the general direction they had set off in. "Maybe the crew tried to leave the ship?"

Aescunnar remained skeptical. "And why did an Arkonide ship enter the solar system centuries or millennia ago? And who shot it down?"

"Probably not the people of Earth, right?" said Gucky.

"Oh Gucky, that's very unlikely. We humans haven't had space travel for very long."

"Well," said Manoli, "I wouldn't call what we had before 'space travel.' We just got to the Moon on our own."

"Not without some help," Aescunnar reminded him.

"Fiddlesticks. We made it to the Moon on our own. From then on, we had to piggyback on Arkonide technology so that we could make it to another solar system."

A closed bulkhead blocked their path. The group turned around

to follow another that looked open about fifty meters farther back.

Aescunnar resumed the conversation after turning down the new corridor. “Manoli, you are unjust to humanity. A hundred, no, fifty years ago, it would have been impossible for humans to handle a spaceship. Imagine if contact with the Arkonides had taken place in the twentieth century. Unimaginable! We would not have been able to understand the technology behind Arkonide ‘miracles’ at all.”

“Then let’s be grateful that the spacecraft on the Moon didn’t crash decades or centuries earlier.”

“But Manoli, that’s exactly what I’m getting at.” Aescunnar didn’t let up. “The spacecraft on the Moon is not the first remnant of Arkonide technology left in the solar system. The dome on the seabed, the refuge on Venus, the spaceship on Titan: there are all these Arkonide legacies, spread over the entire history of mankind. It seems that the Arkonides used our solar system as a galactic junkyard to dispose of their fleet.”

Manoli was about to answer when the ground under them slipped away. Gucky lurched forward to touch the two humans at the same time in case a teleport was needed. But as quickly as the movement had come, it ceased almost immediately.

Aescunnar listened to the beating of his heart, which sounded like a drum in his ears. “The ship…it’s slipping.”

“That was to be assumed,” Manoli replied in a controlled manner. “It just means we have to hurry if we want to achieve our goal.”

Gucky stopped and crossed his arms in front of his chest. “What do you think I should do when the ship finally starts to slide?”

Manoli turned to the Ilt. “The ship will not break apart if it falls. The material is far too resistant for that. It did not resist the oceans of Titan for so long and previously survive a space battle to break up now. It’s much more likely some object or piece of wreckage could move and hit us. Or we could crash against a wall as the craft falls.”

“Neither scenario is particularly appealing...” grumbled Gucky.

“Maybe it’s we who are making it slide,” Aescunnar noted.

“Our three bodies are unlikely to be the deciding factor. Rather, it is activities such as the cryovolcano that cause changes in the currents.”

“Still, you have to admit that our time is running out here!” The historian was seriously concerned about the wellbeing of their small group.

“I don’t want to extend our stay here. A short tour of the *Igita* would please me very much, sure. But if we want to find a suit, we have to get closer to the bridge.”

Aescunnar had nothing to respond with. Silently, they continued on their way.

Finally Manoli stopped in front of a bulkhead. Behind them, there had been no other corridors branching out for over thirty meters. He turned to his companions. “We have no other choice here. We have to open this bulkhead if we want to get into the bridge.”

“Should I jump in?”

“Too risky. You are our only option when it comes to getting off the ship quickly.” Manoli closed the helmet of his spacesuit. Immediately, his voice rang out in Aescunnar’s helmet. “If there’s water on the other side, I’m prepared.”

“But your air supply?” said Aescunnar.

“Well, it’s not great in here, but I can stand it for a few minutes. And it’s better to live in smelly air than to drown.”

Manoli approached the bulkhead. There was no wheel with which you could open it. And the mechanism was guaranteed to have succumbed to time years ago. Also, they had found no evidence of electricity still working on board the *Igita*.

Manoli tried to open the bulkhead with his hands. Nothing happened. “Aescunnar, come help!”

Together they pulled at the door to no avail.

“Maybe we’re pulling on the wrong side of the door?” wondered Aescunnar.

“Unlikely. But if you say so.”

Both went to the other side to try just as unsuccessfully to open the passage.

“And now?” asked Aescunnar, annoyed.

“We’ll use our miracle weapon!” Manoli pointed at the upper right edge of the bulkhead. “Gucky, can you try to pull there with your gifts while the two of us try this down here?”

“Of course,” Gucky replied.

Now the three of them tried to open the bulkhead. The heavy Arkonide steel still did not move a millimeter.

“Oof,” Manoli said after some time. “I have to open my helmet.”

Apparently, his plan wasn’t as optimal as he had imagined. Aescunnar was worried about his companion.

Together they studied the bulkhead.

“Is there no other way in?” asked Gucky.

“No, not in my opinion.” Manoli stood thoughtfully in front of the barrier. His face took on a grim expression, which did not fit at all with the image of the otherwise friendly doctor. “Look, if I explain to you where I think the lock is, can you reach in with your powers and release it?”

“I think so.”

Aescunnar was again amazed at how experienced Gucky seemed

to be in such matters. Manoli ignored the Ilt's quick response and told him where the mechanism was located and what he thought it looked like.

Gucky listened to the explanation in silence, then said, "I'm ready."

Manoli took a deep breath and closed the helmet. "Go!" he cried.

Immediately Gucky's powers took effect. Aescunnar looked at the surface in front of him. Something seemed to be happening. He had the impression that the heavy bulkhead had just moved a tiny bit. Immediately, he took a step forward and began to pull on it. Manoli did the same.

Indeed, the bulkhead moved. Slowly, but noticeably, it was pulled out of its heavy metal frame.

"Gucky!" Manoli called, and the alien seemed to switch to using his gifts to pull. It suddenly became much easier to move the bulkhead, which slowly slid open.

Once the opening was wide enough to let someone in, Manoli was the first to go onto the bridge.

"Manoli, what's in there?" Aescunnar saw the glimmer of light emanating from the doctor's suit, but Manoli stood in front of him in the passage and blocked his direct view.

"I see...wonderful things." His voice was hardly a whisper.

"A spacesuit?"

The doctor shook his head briefly, as if coming to his senses. "Something...else." He took a step forward and then stepped aside, out of sight.

Now, Aescunnar also saw the ship's bridge. The first thing he noticed was complete destruction. Apparently, the attack on the *Igita* had caused internal damage as well. Most consoles showed

traces of fire.

This ship will never fly again, he thought to himself.

Then his gaze fell on the middle of the room. On a pedestal stood an object that Aescunnar would never have expected to see. The object attracted his gaze almost magically—an arch transmitter!

Aescunnar stepped past Manoli. In the middle of the room stood a pedestal with a diameter of perhaps five meters. On it was the transmitter.

Something is wrong with the pedestal, Aescunnar noticed. He looked at it again. “Manoli, look here!”

The doctor came over. “What is it?”

“The pedestal is completely undamaged. There’s debris all over the room, but it’s as if the debris did not dare to cross a line formed around the outer edge of the pedestal.”

“Hm,” Manoli said, “a force field?”

“In any case, it’s gone out.”

“And the transmitter?”

Aescunnar was not sure that the protective shield was turned off. A little reserved, he put a leg up on the podium, but nothing happened.

A little more relaxed, he approached the transmitter. The pedestal was completely free of rubble. But the transmitter clearly showed traces of damage. Parts of the surface had melted; in one place, there was a bubble that must have formed under extreme heat. The surface of the arch appeared dull in many places, as if a heat wave had wafted over it.

“An explosion?”

Manoli looked over the transmitter. “An explosion wouldn’t

leave uniform traces on the surface. Here someone wanted to make sure that the transmitter would never be used again."

It seemed like a crime to Aescunnar that someone wanted to destroy this marvel of technology. "Who could have done it? The Arkonide crew, so that the transmitter does not fall into foreign hands? Or Harno, for whatever reason."

"Hardly," said Manoli. "Harno may have tried to protect the transmitter. Or the crew could have died in a firefight while defending it."

"Just not enough information." Aescunnar sighed.

Suddenly, they heard a scratching noise. The wreck moved again a tiny bit, only to come to rest at an oblique angle.

"We have to get out of here!" concluded Aescunnar. "The suit!"

A second later, Gucky was standing between the two. Apparently, he had waited for the opportunity to appear theatrically. A complete Arkonide spacesuit was spread out over his arms.

"While the gentlemen were busy admiring the transmitter, I made myself useful." He held out Manoli's new suit. "Go, fast. We have very little time, if I'm right."

Manoli looked at the suit skeptically.

"I examined it," Gucky claimed. "The thing seems to be airtight."

Manoli did not hesitate for a moment more. He peeled himself out of his spacesuit and put on the ancient Arkonide specimen.

"Air?" he asked Gucky.

"Half full. That's definitely better than suffocating in this leaky thing in a few minutes." He made a disparaging reference to Manoli's spacesuit.

"But all this here..." the historian pointed out. "Can we leave this

behind?”

“Take a souvenir with you,” Gucky suggested. “But when Manoli has his helmet closed, I jump.”

The historian looked around. Then he reached for a piece of covering that had fallen off one of the consoles. *Maybe we can determine the age of the ship when we’re back on Earth. And if that doesn’t work, I still have a unique memento from the* Igita.

As soon as Manoli had closed his helmet, Gucky reached out to touch his two companions.

Soon, they were floating in the ocean, just above the *Igita*.

“And now?” asked Manoli.

“Everything is fine with you?” Aescunnar wasn’t sure if the Arkonide suit would really hold up.

“All vitals are in the green,” Manoli replied. “I suggest Gucky takes us back to the entrance of the cryovolcano. From there, we can climb to the top ourselves.”

Gucky did not answer. He was staring spellbound at the wreck of the *Igita*. His expression was strange. Aescunnar followed him, fascinated.

It’s like being an observer above the deck of the Titanic.

A shudder went through the ship. It leaned to the side. As the top of the wreck protruded over the cliff, the ship rolled over the edge and then fell down into Titan’s ocean. It took a while until it was no longer visible in the murky water.

“Not a moment too soon,” Gucky commented dryly.

“It doesn’t mean we’re safe here. We have to get back to the surface.” Back in a functioning spacesuit, Manoli took the lead again.

Gucky grabbed their hands, and they teleported to the place

where they had first descended into the interior of the ocean. From there, the Ilt took the lead, followed by Manoli and Aescunnar.

Halfway through, Manoli asked to take a break.

“Oxygen levels?” asked Aescunnar, immediately worried.

“No. I’m just so terribly exhausted again.”

“No wonder. Now you have a new spacesuit, your stress levels are down, and your body needs its rest.” Aescunnar himself was not convinced by his words. Manoli’s fatigue ran like a red thread through the last few days. Something was wrong with the doctor.

After a few minutes, Manoli felt strong enough to continue the climb. Going up was much more exhausting than their descent. Titan’s gravity was less than Earth’s, but the icy surface was smooth and slippery. In addition, many of the places that Gucky had laboriously opened for them on the way down had now frozen over. Every few meters, the mutant had to break away pieces of ice to clear the way again.

To the top, Aescunnar pondered. *As if the sun were waiting for us at the top, and a green meadow stretched across the horizon. But when we do get to the top, we’ll still be on the surface of Titan, far away from home!*

“Hopefully they haven’t left yet,” Manoli said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I don’t know if they would have been able to locate us under the ice sheet. Maybe they followed us, found no trace of our ship, and then made their way home.”

“I think I would have felt it if thinking beings had been on the surface,” Gucky said.

“Even if they were only there for one orbit?”

“I think so,” Gucky replied, a little uncertainly.

“Aescunnar, stop painting the devil on the wall!” warned Manoli. “I don’t believe that we would have been let down just like that. Wait until we’re back on the surface.”

“Fine.” For the rest of the ascent, the historian remained silent.

Aescunnar later did not know how long they had waited on the surface. Minutes maybe, possibly hours.

They no longer talked to each other. Everyone was making sure that their oxygen did not run out prematurely. And no one commented on their behavior. They were probably all keeping an eye on their oxygen levels and trying to slow down and stay calm.

It was Manoli’s voice that was the first to break the silence. “There!” He pointed upwards.

“A shooting star,” Aescunnar said sarcastically. “Can I wish for something now?”

Manoli stood up. “That’s not a shooting star! It’s a spaceship.”

“How do we draw its attention to us?” asked Gucky.

“We can light a fire or put a big X on the beach using palm leaves,” the historian quipped.

“What do you mean by that?” Gucky had probably missed the fact that Aescunnar’s comment had been meant sarcastically.

“They will locate us,” Manoli said calmly.

The supposed shooting star quickly grew larger. Soon, they saw the identifier and the font, and then they knew it was the *Nesbitt Breck*.

“Saved!” Aescunnar sighed.

They silently watched as the ship started to land next to them.

Suddenly, a gurgling sound rang out. Aescunnar turned to

Manoli, but he was fine. He had turned around and immediately rushed to Gucky. The doctor bent over the body of the alien, who had suddenly slumped to the ground.

“What’s happening to him?” asked Aescunnar.

“I don’t know.” Manoli methodically checked Gucky’s suit. “I…”

The doctor collapsed unconscious next to the Ilt.

23.

Goodbyes

Reyan

Sometime

Rhodan had gathered his group around him in one of the cabins, and the scout had joined them as well. Rhodan tried to dampen their fears.

“We are all literally in the same boat. We’re all not supposed to be here. Alrad shares my fear: the Ferrons will hold us responsible for what happened.” He looked over at the scout. “Especially when the Ferrons learn that this shape is not your natural form. What’s hidden under your camouflage?”

The scout didn’t say a word.

“Ras?” Rhodan turned to Tschubai.

The teleporter was unsure. “As I said, not a Ferron, not a human being.” He thought for a moment. “Human-shaped, but more fingers. I would guess six or seven, not five like now. His eyes were like marbles on the sides of his head. He had a scar on his forehead, like a writhing snake. And his skin is...peculiar. But I only saw him very briefly in bad light on the ship. Then his clothes flickered, and he immediately looked like this again.”

“And?”

The scout did not respond to Rhodan’s prompt.

“Fine. We must leave the catamaran before the Ferrons agree on a further course of action. Suggestions?”

Everyone knew that Reyan was now enemy territory for them. In an atmosphere in which one would look for someone to hold accountable for the war, they were always in danger as strangers.

Rhodan looked at the scout. “We appeared on your ship. So you or your people have access to transmitter technology. Can you help us?”

The scout kept silent.

“I could have let you die aboard your ship, just as you delivered us to certain death when we were on board.” Rhodan’s voice grew louder. “We did not take revenge on you, but spared your life. Now it’s up to you to help us.”

The scout opened his lips. His voice no longer sounded like it had when they’d first met. It had become rougher, throatier. “There may be a way to help you here.”

“Good. How?”

“They will look for me. Before the attack, my ship sent out an emergency transmission. We can only hope that I will be found before the Ferrons have decided to take action against us.”

Rhodan thought for a moment. “Can your people locate you?”

“Yes,” replied the scout succinctly.

“Good. Can you find out when you will be saved?”

“They will contact me.”

“And then...”

“We have transmitters.”

“Does this mean that you will bring us back to our time and homeland?”

“I am not allowed to grant you that.”

“Then at least return us to our time,” Rhodan countered.

“Nor am I allowed to fulfill that wish.”

“Why not?”

“I have my reasons. But you do not belong in this world or this time. That’s why I can help you.”

Rhodan sighed. “We have no choice.” He turned to the group. “Lossoshér, Chaktor, you accompany me to see Alrad. The rest of you stay here. I hope that the presence of the two Ferrons in the conversation will make us appear less like strangers to the crew.”

“Well, I’ll keep my fingers crossed!” Bull commented dryly.

Their conversation with Alrad was not very successful. The Superior promised to do everything possible to keep the crew happy until rescue came for the scout, and thus for the strangers. But she couldn’t guarantee anything.

“Rhodan, you have to understand! What is happening in our solar system is difficult for my people to process. Yesterday, we weren’t even rebels, today we are in a war that seems to encompass the entire solar system.”

“It…doesn’t look good for your cause?” asked Rhodan.

“I don’t even know what *my cause* is. But we have not managed to remove the environment of the planet from the Ferrons’ interference. The damage that the last few hours have done far outweighs everything we have done in the last four hundred years.” A jolt went through her body. “Rhodan, you must leave here! It was you who warned us of this development. And as they say on Ferrol, ‘the announcer of the truth needs a quick Kimilen.’”

Rhodan laughed. “In my homeland there is a similar saying: ‘Whoever speaks the truth needs a fast horse.’”

“Then you understand what I’m trying to say?”

Rhodan became serious again. “Of course.”

The next few hours went painfully slowly. Several times, Rhodan had to fight down the urge to ask the scout when the promised rescue was to be expected. He looked over at the alien several

times, but the stranger seemed to be staring absently into nothingness.

Hopefully this means that he's receiving a transmission! thought Rhodan.

Then, the door to their cabin was thrown open. A sailor appeared in the opening. "Alrad asks all of you to follow me to the deck!"

Hopefully, this is the event we expected and not the prelude to an execution...

Rhodan's gloomy premonitions were not fulfilled. Alrad stood at the railing, surrounded by the captain and most of the crew. Far above the catamaran, three spacecraft hovered in the sky. They formed an isosceles triangle.

Alrad turned to the scout. "Your people, right?"

"Yes."

"And now...more attacks on Reyan?" Her voice sounded shrill. Her face bore concern for her homeland.

"No," the scout reassured her. "You have to believe me that the alleged attack on Reyan was only the unfortunate consequence of my ship crashing. And this crash was caused by enemy forces that come from neither Ferrol nor Reyan."

Rhodan listened. "But?" he asked.

The scout turned to him. "You are very curious. Be grateful that I owe you something." He turned to Alrad again. "It's time to say goodbye. Ask your people to clear the front deck."

Without hesitation, Alrad gave the orders.

The scout's face once again took on a blank look.

Bull had kept an eye on the sky. "There! Look!"

He pointed upward. A bulkhead opened on one of the spacecraft, and a transmitter arch descended majestically from it. Slowly, it floated down to the deck of the catamaran.

“It’s that simple...” Bull murmured.

“Reg, you know that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

Bull sighed. “Still, I’m always surprised when it turns out to be true.”

“Me too,” Rhodan reassured him. “Me too...”

A few minutes later, the arch transmitter was firmly placed on the deck of the catamaran, as if it had always been there. Rhodan stepped in front of the scout.

“You can’t tell us where the transmitter will send us?”

“As I said,” he replied, “I am helping you because you saved my life. Don’t expect any more.”

Rhodan hesitated. It was Bull who took the floor. “Perry, we have no other choice. Sooner or later, we’ll become victims of a witch hunt. And even though I don’t trust this guy, this might be our best option at the moment.” He pointed at the transmitter.

“You’re right.” Rhodan turned to Ferron. “Superior Alrad, I can do no more than wish you all the best for the future.” He remained silent for a moment. “Actually, Superior, there is something I can give you along the way. After the years of war, a Ferron culture will emerge that encompasses large parts of your solar system, and you will be at peace with each other.”

The Superior nodded. “I...thank you. We have lost the present, but we can still win the future. All the best!”

Rhodan bowed before the brave woman. Then he looked back at his small group. “Chaktor and I will take the lead. Then Thora and Ras, then Bull and Sue. Lossoshér will take up the rear, agreed?”

Everyone nodded. They briefly checked their meager equipment, and Rhodan nodded to the scout.

“We’re ready.”

With a strange gesture, the scout activated the transmitter. Rhodan and Chaktor passed through the arch, followed by Thora and Tschubai. Bull took Sue by the arm as they stepped through together.

Lossoshér seemed to hesitate for a while.

“You can trust me,” said the scout. He made an inviting gesture towards the archway.

“I trust you,” replied the old Ferron. But a jolt went through him. “However, I have decided, I will stay.” He looked over at Alrad. “The history of my people is my life. This is the story of my people, so this is my life.”

“As you wish.” The scout made another gesture, and the transmitter deactivated before gently lifting from the deck and floating upward towards the spaceships.

The scout looked at the old Ferron. “I hope that you never regret your decision. I have to say goodbye.”

“Stop!” Lossoshér took a step towards the scout. “One more question.”

“Yes?”

“What is your name?”

The scout was surprised. “Does that matter?”

“For me, yes. A good story doesn’t just need dates and places, but also heroes. And those heroes need names.”

The scout remained silent for a moment. “I am honored by your assessment. Fine! My name is…Carfesch.”

With that, the scout, too, floated up towards the ships.

24.

Words Against Forgetting

Reyan

Sometime

A field of devastation spread around Telgar. The surface of the ocean was littered with debris. He had to search for four days to find the remains of his family.

So many dead. He was still struggling with tears when he thought about what had happened. *And I wasn't with them.*

It had taken him two days to get there. Infrastructure on Reyan had collapsed, the communication network had gone down on the first day among the many requests and shipments. At the moment, electricity was only being generated continuously for a few hours a day, as many distribution stations had fallen victim to attacks from space.

His family's raft proved to be a tired reflection of its former greatness. The storm had washed over the superstructures, and many of its precious memorabilia had become victims of the waves. His third wife had tried to hold one of their children. She had been washed overboard. No trace of them had been found.

Telgar thought about what had been the trigger for everything. He had been so full of hope. He had hoped that there could be an agreement with the mud creepers. He had believed that the inhabitants of this planet could be united. He'd had in mind an uprising against Ferrol, a rebellion, but more like a kind of disobedience which did not involve bloodshed.

When the strangers had stepped up to the podium, he had even hoped that the congregation would return to its senses. The raid of Ferrol and the strike against Rey had shattered all his hopes.

Now there was only one thing he could do: he had to make sure that posterity learned what had happened in those days. He had never been a man of big words. But until now, he had not heard of any other survivor of the great gathering. Yes, some had remained alive, but Rey and Telgar's closest entourage had been hit hardest by the first attack. Many had not managed to stay afloat like he had, clinging to wreckage until he was able to hijack an abandoned boat. Thirst had almost killed him, but he was a tough hunter. He could catch fish and feed on them. This quenched his hunger and, in certain parts, his thirst.

Telgar sat down at the edge of the raft. His feet hung in the water. In his hand he held the only computer on the raft that was still working. He had given it to his eldest grandson for his sixth birthday. It was an indestructible model with a self-sufficient, long-term power supply so that the child did not always have to think about charging it.

My grandson.

He let the tears flow. Only when he was able to look into the distance again without those tears blurring his vision did he begin his recordings.

He simply called his text *The Book of the Great Harvest*. He wrote his first words: "My name is Telgar. I want to report how it actually was..."